

detecting early warning signs

How do we know that a storm is about to break? Perhaps we hear thunder in the distance, the skies are dark and grey with rain clouds, and it becomes very windy. If we do not want to be caught with the worst effects of the storm, we would probably go back to our homes, close all the windows, bring our washing in from the line, and secure any loose items outside the house. Similarly, if bipolar patients become more aware of their early warning signs that signal the onset of a mood episode, they can take steps to prevent a full-blown episode of depression and mania.

Early detection of an impending “storm” – in the case of bipolar disorder, an episode of mania or depression – can enable you to intervene early and prevent a mood episode. In order to be able to detect an oncoming episode, you must learn to recognise your own early warning signs and symptoms of your illness. Each person has their own unique set of signs and symptoms although many will be common to other patients.

It is not enough to be able to recognise and detect early warning signs and symptoms of a mood episode, you need also to monitor them regularly. It will not be much good if you are aware of your early warning signs and symptoms, but you continue to go through your daily life without paying much attention to the onset of the symptoms. Similarly, a person who knows that ominous grey clouds, thunder, lightning, and rushing wind signal an impending storm can still get caught in the storm if they were sitting on a park bench too engrossed in a book to look around them. Therefore, regular monitoring of early warning signs is important for the purpose of early intervention to prevent relapse.

What are Early Warning Signs?



Early warning signs of a relapse or an episode recurrence are symptoms or experiences that ‘forecast’ or ‘predict’ that a full-blown mood episode is not too far away. Some patients may think that they are not able to predict an episode but researchers have found that many bipolar patients are able to recall early warning symptoms that come before a full-blown episode. Bipolar patients have commonly reported increased activity, decreased need for sleep, and elevated mood as early warning signs of mania, and depressed mood, loss of energy, loss of interest in people or activities, impaired concentration, and thoughts of death as early warning signs for depression. Although there are some differences in the specific early warning symptoms experienced by patients, these symptoms are often the same within each patient in

subsequent episodes. Thus, although some early warning symptoms may be unique to individual patients, they might be quite accurate in predicting the onset of a mood episode for each patient.

To identify your early warning signs of mania and depression, ask yourself, “What am I like when my mood is mildly elevated and moderately elevated? What am I like when I am mildly depressed and moderately depressed? Write them down and reflect on the three or four most prominent early warning symptoms of mania and depression. Will you be able to recognise these symptoms when you next experience them? This is where regular monitoring is necessary. Keep a lookout for these early warning signs.

Planning Early Interventions

The next step is to develop an action plan that details what you will do when you recognise the early warning signs and symptoms of a major depressive or manic episode. It is important to be prepared so that when the time comes, you will know what to do. Plan what you will do, what you will say, what you will ask your friends and family to do for you, etc. For example, your action plan may include a visit to your doctor when you recognise your energy level has increased and are feeling restless, or you may ask a friend to keep your credit card when you have the urge to shop for shoes, or request that a relative drop by to visit you when you stop calling them, etc. You may also want to ask your friends and family to say specific things to you to highlight the possibility that you might be becoming unwell. It’s probably good to let them know the best way to say it so it doesn’t offend you. Detail your early intervention plans carefully and keep them on your desk or on the refrigerator – somewhere that is easily accessible or visible – so that you can refer to them when the need arises.



Studies have shown that being aware of your early warning signs, monitoring them, having an early intervention plan, and then acting on that plan when the need arises can help you prevent a full-blown depressive or manic episode. So start planning and preparing now! It might also be a good idea to discuss this with your doctor or mental health professional.