

Introduction

Kevin describes Ashley's life as like a roller coaster ride. Sometimes she's really "up" and excited—bursting with energy, filled with enthusiasm, and feeling like she's on top of the world. Other times it's the exact opposite: her mood is way down, she's lethargic, and she's negative about everything, including being certain her misery never will end.

When Ashley's feeling good she acts impulsively—speeds, goes on spending sprees, drinks too much—and doesn't think of the potential negative consequences of her actions. Kevin has tried to caution her when she's like this, but Ashley gets angry and accuses him of being "a stick in the mud." So during these periods he's learned it's best to keep silent but stay "on alert," like a firefighter waiting for the next emergency call.

When Ashley's depressed there are problems too. She has trouble at her job—missing days, not getting her work done, and isolating herself from her coworkers by keeping her office door shut. She worries about losing her job, and though Kevin tries to reassure her, the truth is he's worried too. Could they manage without his wife's income? Would she be okay if she were home all day instead of away and occupied, or would she get even more depressed?

Ashley has bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness. And although Kevin's moods are no different from the average person's ups and downs, he's carried along on the roller coaster ride with

his wife. Her unpredictable mood swings are extremely difficult for Kevin to live with, as is the fallout that follows her highs and lows. Whether it's meeting expectations at work, keeping up with friends and family, pursuing hobbies and interests, and, at times, even just taking care of the basics of sleeping, eating, and grooming—bipolar disorder makes day-to-day life a challenge for both of them.

If your spouse or partner has this illness, he or she is hardly alone, nor are you. In fact, bipolar disorder is present in more than 3% of our population. Although it occurs in children and adolescents, the disorder appears most frequently in adults. It's equally common in men and women and cuts across all races, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, religions, and economic levels. And it occurs across the globe.

Some of the greatest minds and talents of our times have had bipolar disorder, including world-renowned politicians, artists, actors, musicians, and writers. Winston Churchill, Ernest Hemingway, Vincent van Gogh, and Robert Schumann are just a few of the remarkable individuals who have suffered from this disorder. Most of the people who have this problem, however, would not necessarily be considered extraordinary. Like Ashley, and probably like the person you care so much about, they're regular people who just want to lead normal lives.

I know about the goals and aspirations of bipolar people because of my professional and personal experience with the illness. Being a clinical psychologist, I have treated bipolar individuals and their families for more than a quarter of a century. But as or more important, although fortunate to have a relatively mild version of the condition, I have bipolar disorder myself.

I ignored the obvious for as long as I possibly could. I say "ignored the obvious" because, as I said, having diagnosed and treated bipolar disorder in my practice I was well aware of how the illness manifests itself. This knowledge, however, didn't help me accept what was there to see, that my problem wasn't "personality quirks" or depression. Although, in retrospect, it's clear that I had had bipolar disorder since adolescence, it wasn't until my 30s that I got the correct diagnosis, and it wasn't until I turned 40 that I believed it was true.

Because I've had this disorder most of my life and because I've treated so many bipolar individuals and their families, I know the effects this illness has not just on the person who has the disorder but also on the people who are close by, especially spouses and partners.

In my situation I have seen how much my husband of 20 years has been affected by my illness, watching him suffer along with me during my mood episodes, day after day, week after week, feeling helpless to change my course. Thank goodness once I finally accepted the diagnosis I was able to get the right treatment—the correct medication and self-help strategies—to keep the pendulum from swinging too far in one direction or the other. So now both my husband and I are leading stable lives.

Helplessness is only one of the feelings that spouses and partners of people with bipolar disorder experience. Fear and worry also are common emotions. It can be very scary—for those of you who have loved ones who have the more severe form of the illness—to watch the out-of-control behavior that can occur during manic highs and to live through the horrendous aftermath of serious risk-taking behavior. It also can be frightening to watch your spouse or partner during the low times, when he or she is unable or barely able to follow a normal routine or gets so despondent that death seems like the only answer.

Watching someone you love go through mood swings can be heart-breaking. If you are an especially sensitive and empathetic person, you may actually feel the emotional pain that your loved one is experiencing, and possibly even have mood problems yourself (not of the same magnitude as those with bipolar disorder, but real and painful nonetheless) as a result of living with someone with this illness.

On the other hand you may be angry—angry at how your partner's mood swings are affecting you and, if you have children, the rest of your family. Kevin feels this way. His family is struggling with the financial consequences of Ashley's bipolar disorder—because of lost work time and excessive spending—as well as the effects the illness has had on their two young children, whose care often falls to Kevin, particularly when Ashley has been drinking or is depressed. The relationship between Ashley and her husband is, to say the least, strained, as are the couple's relationships with friends and relatives: Ashley keeps to herself at home when she's depressed, just as she does at her workplace. Because of all this, Kevin, understandably, is irritable and short-tempered.

Kevin and Ashley are concerned about the future for another reason: bipolar illness is a largely genetic disorder. If you too have children, you may be worried that one of your offspring will end up with the disorder, and if you see early warning signs of the illness in your

child you may feel that you are to blame and terribly guilty. If you are in this situation, please know that in the 21st century we are at a time of great advances in the treatment of bipolar disorder, in both pharmacological and psychological therapies, so you don't need to be so afraid for your child—or your mate either for that matter—or filled with guilt.

Feelings of shame and secrecy also may be part of the bipolar experience for you and your loved one. Trying to keep the mood swings “quiet” and away from other people—friends, employers, employees, even relatives—can be an enormous, exhausting task. If mood swings can't be kept private, because of manic behavior that occurs outside the home or depressed behavior that keeps your partner from being able to meet responsibilities, like going to work, you may feel embarrassed or ashamed.

You may often feel like you're walking on eggshells—waiting for the next mood episode while simultaneously trying your best to keep things on an even keel for your mate. You may try to protect your partner from upsetting issues and situations, shouldering the load yourself to try to keep your loved one from being “triggered.” Carrying an enormous burden like this can be extremely stressful, but you may be so tuned in to your mate's illness that you don't have time to think about its impact on you. Your emotional well-being, as a result, may fall by the wayside.

And that—your well-being—is the primary reason for my writing this book: to help people who don't have the illness meet (and, I hope, minimize) the challenges that come from having a loved one with bipolar disorder. Although many books have been written for people who have this disorder, almost none have been written expressly for you and others like you, the spouses and partners of those suffering with the illness.

In this book I've given you everything I know—from my patients' and their families' experiences, from the best research has to offer, and from the personal journey my husband and I have taken and continue to take—about living with and helping someone who has bipolar disorder. Not only will this book help you cope with your loved one's condition, it also will give you real strategies that you can use to help your mate get control over the mood swings. And by helping your mate, you will be helping yourself too.

My husband has seen me through numerous periods of depres-

sion and hypomania, yet he never seems ready to quit. I see the same response in the spouses of patients I work with. Out of all the couples I've met who are dealing with bipolar disorder, I can't think of a single one who has (at least to my knowledge) gotten a divorce. Obviously, my husband isn't the only one working through this illness with someone like me.

Since you too are living with and love someone who has bipolar disorder, I'm sure you're invested in doing everything you can to make the relationship work. At times I know this may seem impossible. If your partner has a severe form of the illness—getting into serious trouble during manic episodes or incapacitated or even worse when depressed—you may think you just can't take it anymore. But you know as well as I do that these periods don't last forever. And behind them is the person you love, the one you thought—and still hope—you'd be with forever.

You don't need to give up the dream of forever. As you will see in this book, there are a great many things you can do to help yourself and your partner to have that life. Although the path to achieving it may be rocky and have some obstacles, the jagged terrain will have footholds—real, solid places—where you can step, climb, and move forward together.