Coping with Depression or Bipolar Disorder at your Job

You are not alone.

Many people with depression and bipolar disorder cope with job-related issues. According to DBSA's recent constituency survey, the most common are:

- My illness affected my ability to perform job duties 88%
- I had to change jobs more often than other people 65%
- I was passed up for a promotion 65%
- I had to completely change my career 60%
- I quit working outside the home 58%
- I was given less responsibility at work 48%

Taking care of yourself at work

Take breaks, even when you don't think you need them.

Know what increases your stress level.

Recognize when you are feeling more stress and need to step back from your work. You might want to take a short time-out to meditate, relax, listen to music, or read.

Know that you can be most productive with a stable mood. Don't allow mania or hypomania to go untreated. As productive as you may feel at the time, you may be more likely to make mistakes.

Find a sense of purpose or passion in your personal life. Know that there is more to your life than work. This may include:

- Helping your local DBSA group
- Volunteering
- Spending time with family and friends
- Going after other goals such as learning a new skill
- Planning events you can look forward to

Tell yourself you can feel better when you are having a difficult day. Even if you don't feel better right away, know that you have the tools to work toward wellness.

Get encouragement and perspective by making a short phone call to a friend or family member.

Stick with your treatment while working. It's important to take your medication(s) as prescribed, even at work. Keep your medication in a vitamin bottle or take it during your lunch hour if you don't want others to see it. Set a timer, alarm or reminder on your computer if you often forget to take medication.

Address side effects. Talk to your doctor about changing your dosing time if your medication makes you feel drowsy or restless at work. Take medication with food if nausea is a problem. Keep water nearby if you get a dry mouth.

Get enough sleep, eat nutritious meals and do some type of physical activity daily.
Get help before there is a crisis. Make an appointment with your health care provider right away if you feel an episode coming on, so you can take steps to stabilize your mood.

Be prepared. Sometimes an episode of depression or mania happens even when you are doing everything right following your treatment, sleeping and eating enough, and getting support. If this happens, get the help you need.

Take time to recover if you have had a manic or depressive episode. Allow yourself to take things slower.

Getting the Most from your Job

Look for opportunities to learn at work. Knowledge and skills can always help you, even if you aren't able to use what you learn right away.

Use creative problem-solving skills to manage your time and workload. Make to-do lists that are easy for you to use. Write things down if you have trouble remembering them.

See each challenge as a learning experience. Even if the experience is difficult, ask yourself what you can learn from it.

Gain strength from your past successes. Apply things that worked for you in past to new challenges you face. When you are praised at work, remember it.

Do your best, regardless of how you feel.

Believe that you are worthwhile, and you are doing good work. Give yourself credit for everything you do, including small things.

Direct your energy toward one project at a time, and break large projects down into small, manageable steps.

Working with others

Address problems as they happen, rather than building resentment. Discuss your needs with your supervisor using "I" statements, such as "I feel pressured when I get an important project at the last minute."

Accept your own limitations and try not to take on more work than you can handle.

Ask for help. Take opportunities to learn from others and empower yourself.

Accept others and their limitations. If you have trouble with a co-worker, focus on the problem, not the person.

Be ready to change. Keep an open mind and accept constructive criticism.

Should I tell anyone about my illness?

It is your choice whether to talk about your illness at work and who to tell. Not everyone is educated about depression and bipolar disorder. You may choose not to tell anyone, or you may choose to tell others in order to educate them.

You may need to discuss your illness with your supervisor if you need special accommodations. These may include shorter days, special hours, more frequent breaks, time off, or changes in job responsibilities or work environment.

Discuss your needs with your supervisor. Bring some educational materials about your illness. You might want to bring a letter from your health care provider. Let your supervisor know what you need and why you need it. Point out positive things, such as how the accommodation will help you be more productive.

Are there laws that protect me at work?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects people from discrimination due to disability. It is a complicated set of laws that affects people in different ways. Research ADA laws carefully to find out if they apply to your situation before taking action. More ADA information is available by calling the U.S. Department of Justice ADA Information Line at 1-800-
Taking time off

While it's important to use your support network to help cope with job-related problems, it's just as important to take care of your health. Take advantage of paid sick leave or vacation time if your symptoms become severe. If you don't have enough leave time, you have some other options.

Short- or long-term disability insurance is offered by some employers. These policies allow employees to take time off with a percentage of their pay if they are ill or injured. Look through your employee manual or check with your Human Resources department to find out what your workplace offers. You may also be able to buy a policy on your own.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is a law that allows employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave during a year if the employee or a family member becomes seriously ill. FMLA is a complex law; research it to see if you can benefit from it. For more information, call 1-866-487-9243 (TTY 1-877-869-5627) or visit www.dol.gov/esa/whd/fmla.

Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits are government benefits paid to people who can't work because of physical or mental disability. You can apply for SSDI at your local Social Security Administration office, by phone or online. Call 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778) or visit www.ssa.gov to learn more about SSDI.

Activities during recovery

When you are recovering from an episode of mania or depression, you may need to spend some time with no demands on your time or energy. Later, when you start to feel better, you may want something to occupy your time. Volunteering may be an option. Contact charity organizations in your area to find out what type of assistance they need. Helping your local DBSA group or forming a new group can also be rewarding.

As you recover, pace yourself to keep from becoming over-stressed. When you go back to work, you might want to work part-time until you are sure your symptoms are stabilized.

Going back to work

If you have quit a job or been fired, or if you are unable to find a job, you are not alone. Getting back to work right away if you haven't been working for awhile, may take some time. Having ideas about your goals and skills can help. Ask a talk therapist or employment counselor for help identifying your skills and planning your search. Look for community-based services with sliding fee scales.

Make a list of your skills and the qualities that make you a good employee. Are you creative? Hard working? Friendly? Considerate? What life experiences have you had, and what have you learned from them? All these things are assets you can bring to a job.

Then list the things you want from a job. Do you like to work alone or with a large group? Do you prefer a quiet environment or one with a lot of activity? Do you prefer simple work or solving complicated problems? Do you like to be given directions or do you prefer to work on your own? What time of day do you prefer to work? How far are you able to commute?

For help writing your resume and cover letter, look for helpful articles in the business section of your newspaper and on job search websites. You can also check your local library or bookstore for books on finding a job. Ask people you know, including those in your DBSA group, if they know of any available jobs. Don't give up hope, even if it takes some time to find a job. Don't let past setbacks or bad job experiences keep you from pursuing your goals.

Job Resources

The following organizations and others listed in this brochure may provide additional help with job-related issues. DBSA assumes no responsibility for the content or accuracy of the material they provide.

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
(Provides information but cannot give individual legal advice.) www.bazelon.org

Disability & Business Technical Assistance Center
This page provides a very brief introduction the Americans with Disabilities Act, Family and Medical Leave Act and Social Security Disability Insurance. The information provided should not take the place of a consultation with the appropriate agency or professional. Decisions regarding leave, disability or other important employment issues should not be based solely on the information on this or any other web site.