

Chapter 7 Excerpt

Looking Forward

Will You Ever Get Better?

We can't answer that question with certainty, but we can assure you that the question is one of the most common ones people ask when they are first diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

One reason why the answer is elusive is that mental disorders are not caused by any one thing, and they don't just affect one aspect of your neurobiology. Instead, we're faced with enormously complex variables that influence how each person develops bipolar disorder and subsequently experiences the illness. We're talking about things such as emotional and psychological stability before the illness, genetic vulnerability to the illness, personal lifestyles, and environmental stresses. And on top of these is the extraordinarily unique way that each person's mind works. You take all these variables, mix them together, and you've got a lot of unpredictability.

Many research studies have tracked the effects of bipolar disorder on different groups of people over very long periods of time. These are called longitudinal studies. Goodwin and Jamison, in their book, *Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression*. 2nd Edition. (2007), have reviewed most of the important longitudinal studies done to date. In summarizing the findings from these studies they conclude that up to one-third of patients actually get better and show no further signs of the disorder. Another third are treated and can live reasonable and

functional lives. And the remaining third experience continued symptoms with a fair degree of social impairment. Sounds grim! But also keep in mind that this bottom third did not have access to recent improvements in treatment.

So the picture is mixed. There is some good news and there are grounds for hope, based on reports that some people truly do get better. The not-so-good news is that many people with bipolar disorder face a lifelong illness. And if you're among those with more severe, treatment-resistant symptoms, bipolar can wreak havoc on your life. We don't want to scare you unnecessarily, but we don't say this lightly. We do want you to have a realistic picture of bipolar disorder.

It's also important to recognize that achieving a sense of hope and optimism about your future wellness won't happen if you're passive. Your success in staying out of the bottom third is contingent on your sustained effort to manage your lifestyle. Let's explore this a bit further.

With mental disorders, just as with many physical disorders, we each have our own genetic and constitutional vulnerabilities. You might think of these as being like the strength or weakness of a house's foundation when it's first built. Once you're actually living in the house, you may not have much influence on the house's structural stability. You may put a lot of effort into upkeep and maintenance, but that's not going to determine how well the house withstands a storm. Thus, we see that for some people with bipolar disorder, in spite of their efforts, they still experience recurrent episodes of instability. Bad genetics, screwed-up brain circuitry, perhaps a very unstable childhood, all work against them. The fact is, there's no guarantee that living well will

buy you any insurance against the disruptive aspects of bipolar disorder. Yes, that's the bad news.

But it doesn't mean that you just throw "living well" out the window. You see, even if your bipolar life is one of extreme emotional unevenness, your efforts to live well will likely serve as a buffer against things getting even more extreme. Your contributions toward managing your disorder will always make a difference; they just won't serve as a guarantee against instability.

So will you get better? Maybe. For many people, getting better probably means getting better for a while as opposed to forever. And if that while ends because you slip into a depressed mood or you transition into hypomania or beyond, then that too will have limited duration and you'll get better again. Since your experience will likely be one of changing mood states, perhaps the question isn't so much *Will I ever get better?* but *What should I be doing to get better now?* And the answer to this question involves much of what you've read thus far. The bottom line is that your chances of remaining well are greatly improved when you understand that healthy living, determination, and positive outcomes are closely intertwined.