

Chapter 3 Excerpt

How Do You Accept All This?

Grieving Your Losses and Letting Them Go

So how do we face those parts of ourselves that we don't want to face? Or more to the point, how do we find some comfort and acceptance with all of the losses associated with bipolar disorder? Some people can find comfort and acceptance on their own. Others may need professional help.

How do you know what's best for you? The answer probably has to do with how successfully you find you are managing the transition into being bipolar. If you find after many months that you're still struggling with feelings of anger, shame, grief, and strong desires to deny or reject the diagnosis, then it's probably time to look for professional help, typically in the form of psychotherapy.

And what's the task or the goal of the therapy? It's really a combination of acceptance and developing the skills to manage your life effectively. But initially, the key to facing your bipolar disorder involves the development of your capacity to accept the changes that you will need to make to live with it; that means allowing yourself room for any accompanying emotional pain, without denial or resistance. You need to explore your reactions to the diagnosis and encounter whatever thoughts and emotions you may find. You get to become a frequent traveler in the realm of your own bipolar experience, so that you can get to know the bipolar landscape.

Let's look at an analogy, more within the physical realm. Imagine you have a knee injury with fairly chronic implications. Rather than doing everything within your power to try to run, imagine accepting that running or other activities requiring strong legs just aren't in the cards and that sometimes you've got to sit on the sidelines and watch others run, skateboard, or whatever. And further, imagine that each time you recognize that you can't do what you really want to do, you also let yourself feel some grief over the loss of your capacity. Not fun, but more adaptive than trying to achieve the impossible.

After having visited this loss many times, imagine that something occurs in life that again reminds you of this limitation. Rather than feeling overwhelmed, you go, "Oh yeah, I know what these feelings are. They're no surprise. I don't like them, but I can accept them." And with the exception of a few moments, you don't skip a beat because you've learned how to live with the painful feelings. And now, you don't struggle against the experience. You don't push it away. You don't try to deny it. You let it in, and you let yourself think about it. You also allow for your feelings of disappointment and loss, which may never quite go away, and then you move on to what's next. Truly, this is a whole lot easier than trying to run when you can't and only ending up in more pain.

The process we're referring to is no different when you are dealing with some of the limitations imposed by bipolar disorder. It's a matter of accepting that which you can't change and mourning the "you" that you once hoped you would become.

The feelings of loss and limitation that we're referring to aren't pretty—there's a lot of anger and sadness wrapped up in these feelings. But the more you're able to simply let them happen, the less likely you will be to get caught up in maladaptive defenses.

So the next obvious question is, How do you learn to let these feelings happen without becoming overwhelmed by all the complex issues? Unfortunately, there isn't an easy answer. But one thing's for sure: ignoring your disorder isn't the answer. For most, the consistent support from friends, family, and loved ones is absolutely essential. On top of that, there are multiple routes towards emotional and psychological health including choices such as medication, psychotherapy, mindfulness, meditation... and much more. Each of you must find the combination of approaches that works best for you.

We're not inviting you to a party. We are inviting you to face the very real complications and losses that may be involved in your experience with bipolar disorder. Occasionally your hypomania may interfere with your work productivity. Sometimes a manic episode may knock you out of commission for several weeks. Sometimes your depression will pull you down. And sometimes your need for a full night's sleep may interfere with the spontaneity of a night out with friends. These are all real possibilities. The adaptations you'll need to make to minimize these derailments will depend upon the unique shape and patterns of your life.

You will have to modify your lifestyle to appropriately adapt and manage your intermittent bipolar symptoms; that's real. And the more you can develop real inner self-acceptance, the more likely you will be to find fulfillment in many different aspects of your life. You don't have to be

the poster child of ideal mental health in order to be loved. But you do have to accept your limitations in order to be whole.