

Chapter 6 Excerpt

Managing Your Independence

Alcohol, Drugs, and Partying

For most people the freedom of being on your own is exciting. You're no longer being under anyone's direct control and influence. Finally, you get to do, say, think, eat, smoke, or drink what you want. Granted, you still may face some limitations based on age, but once you reach 21, not only are you fully adult in the eyes of the law, there are no longer any restrictions on your legal right to purchase or consume alcohol.

With this freedom, it's also common to find that people experiment with drugs or alcohol throughout their late teens and twenties. We'd be remiss if we didn't caution against underage drinking or the use of illicit drugs. Adolescents and young adults often underestimate the risks⁴, but the consequences of being charged with possession or underage drinking will add much unwanted hassle to your life. On the other hand, we also want to acknowledge that underage drinking and drug use do occur, so it's important that you become clear about the healthy choices you'll need to make, especially if you are bipolar.

In recent years research has focused on the importance of tracking blood alcohol concentration (BAC) in order to ensure that behavior isn't impaired by alcohol consumption (Turner et al. 2008). Essentially, this emphasis sends the message to today's young adult that it's not so much a matter of whether you drink, but of how much you drink, the pace of your drinking, and the

relationship of these variables to your body weight. In the absence of other risk factors such as family history of alcohol abuse or the presence of medical conditions incompatible with alcohol use, you might even think there's no harm in allowing yourself a couple of drinks, especially if you do so over a period of several hours. After all, alcohol isn't the same as arsenic—right?

We usually drink expecting to feel differently. Without that expectation, why bother? Water, juice, or soda is much cheaper and easier to get. So what's the problem with wanting to feel more relaxed, calm, or more socially at ease? Simple; sometimes you want to feel more than just a little different. If one drink relaxes you a little, then why not feel relaxed a lot? If one drink takes some of the edge off your social anxiety, then why not get rid of the edge entirely? And here's the big one that weighs against the one or two drink proposition: if one drink has you feeling less inhibited and two even less so, what happens to your ability to put the brakes on after two?

One national survey of college students reported 40% of those surveyed acknowledged having between one and four drinks the last time they socialized. (American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment 2009). From that same survey 38 percent, or almost four out of ten students, reported having five or more drinks in one sitting within the previous two weeks. Quite simply, for young adults, having several drinks in a short period of time is not unusual.

More than a drink or two, especially in a brief period of time, can have you become silly, loud, gregarious, flirtatious, argumentative, and more. And if you're already feeling down or blue, alcohol can cause those feelings to intensify. When we add the loosening of inhibitions to the

mix, which is so common with alcohol use, you'll find you're potentially setting aside your own good judgment and instead being impulsive in ways that aren't typical for you. Many people view this as fun.

But for those who are bipolar, alcohol can be arsenic. Maintaining emotional stability is essential in the effort to prevent or minimize depressive, hypomanic, or manic relapses. The experience of letting loose is not your friend, regardless of how attractive it may seem when you're with others who are drinking. Peer pressure can increase the risks. Just imagine sitting with a group of friends who are downing shots while you're sipping on a bottle of orange juice. This is a potentially dangerous situation.

One further caution: Being bipolar actually raises your risk for developing an alcohol-related disorder (Goodwin and Jamison 2007). If you're bipolar, it's likely that you'll occasionally experience different mood states that are uncomfortable for you. At these times, the allure of alcohol as self-medication may be powerful. If you're very anxious or irritable, alcohol may temporarily help you to feel calmer. If you're distressed because you can't slow your thoughts in order to get to sleep, then alcohol may temporarily take you into sleepiness. And if you're hypomanic and enjoying it, then alcohol may simply feel like it enhances your pleasure. In other words, alcohol can become an easy prescription for feeling better. Clearly, this is a vicious cycle where the very choices you make to feel better increase your chances of feeling worse. It's not such a mystery that mixing booze with bipolar disorder is a bad idea.

And what about drugs? Much of the caution that we've conveyed about alcohol also applies fully to drug use. What's different is that drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, and LSD can have greater impact on your brain and your mental processes than do one or two drinks of alcohol. Getting high with friends may seem like a harmless thing to do. But think about it. Do you really know what you're getting? Does it have a label certifying its purity and dose? We expect these kinds of guarantees from pharmaceutical drugs prescribed to us and even those at times can cause problems. Why would you take such chances with other drugs that affect your neurochemistry? Your emotional stability is too precious to risk being turned upside down by any kind of street drugs. Your journey requires you to be more cautious.

As for partying, it can be fun. But unless you're in a setting where abstinence is a shared norm, partying during the late teens and twenties often involves the presence of alcohol and, possibly, drugs. The university Greek scene typically revolves around drinking and partying. And if you're not in college, it's still true that partying is usually associated with alcohol and/or drugs.

It's important that you understand we're not coming to this discussion from a moralistic perspective judging drug or alcohol-related behavior to be bad or sinful: this isn't our version of *Reefer Madness*. Instead, it's our version of *Living Well with Bipolar Disorder*. We've maintained the position throughout this book that life with bipolar disorder is a different life. This is true, especially when it comes to alcohol, drugs, and partying.

Science shows us that an older brain handles alcohol better (Swartzwelder, 2007). If you're both fortunate and successful in managing your mental health over the next ten to fifteen years, then

you may find that by your mid thirties, a beer or a glass of wine with friends will carry far less risk of adverse outcome.

Your challenge is to find and create activities in your life that provide fun and pleasure outside the context of drugs and alcohol. You can be assured there are plenty of other people whose value systems are consistent with that. There are also fraternities and sororities where alcohol isn't central to their activities; their mission has more to do with community service and scholarship. And more generally speaking, whether you're in college or simply out on your own trying to make a decent living, there are plenty of weekend activities that occur away from the bar scene. They may not be so easy to find, but they're there and so are the people who value them. If you're attending a college or university, there are typically detailed calendars of university-sponsored events available online. If you are outside the college scene, similar online information is available for specific geographic regions. Meetups.com is only one example of an online organization that brings together people with mutual interests within communities all over the country. Organizations such as this provide opportunities to explore pathways free from drugs and alcohol. Explorations in this direction are crucial to maintaining a healthy lifestyle with bipolar disorder. Clearly you want to connect with your peers. Why not connect with those who share your interests and who also make responsible choices?