

# loving someone with bipolar disorder

SECOND EDITION



Understanding  
& Helping  
Your Partner

JULIE A. FAST  
JOHN D. PRESTON, PsyD

“Resources for individuals with bipolar disorder are few and far between, but those for the people who care for them are even scarcer. Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston have put together a valuable resource for families and caregivers of people with bipolar disorder. Taking a holistic perspective, these authors offer advice that will help readers help their loved ones with bipolar disorder. More importantly, this book encourages and helps readers to take good care of themselves and their relationships.”

—Sheri Van Dijk, MSW, RSW, psychotherapist and author of *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for Bipolar Disorder*, *The Bipolar Workbook for Teens*, and other books

“Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston have put together an impressive second-edition guide for couples struggling with the reality of bipolar disorder. They strive to decouple the diagnosis from the individual living with it. This premise lays the groundwork for their discussion of compassionate, non-blaming communication combined with effective couples-based solutions for those striving to work through the interpersonal complexities of a relationship impacted by bipolar disorder. *Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder* really is a must-read for anyone who does.”

—Russ Federman, PhD, ABPP, director of counseling and psychological services at the University of Virginia and author of *Facing Bipolar*

“I am truly impressed with this wonderful book. I will have it in my office and recommend it to patients’ partners as a matter of course as they go through the journey with this illness.”

—Steven Juergens, MD

“More than an education about bipolar disorder, this is a welcome to the journey, in the kindest language you will find in any such book. Open to any page and you will notice the tone and wisdom of people who’ve obviously been there. It’s a challenge to maintain a relationship with someone who has this illness. You’d do well to have a guide, and you will not find any better than Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston. Nor will you find any clearer advice than that which the authors have laid out. Their book is remarkably emotionally intelligent and a privilege to read.”

—James Phelps, MD, mood disorders specialist at Samaritan Mental Health in Corvallis, OR, and author of *Why Am I Still Depressed?*

“This book will help the loved ones of people living with bipolar disorder to better understand its challenges. It provides clear, concrete ways of giving the support needed to keep their loved ones healthy and get them through the rough spots.”

—Ruth White, PhD, MPH, MSW, associate professor of social work at Seattle University and author of *Bipolar 101*

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To Ivan Kanis and Julia Gray Alverson

—J.F.

To Lauren Preston

—J.P.



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—Julie A. Fast  
2003

# CHAPTER ONE

## Getting Started

The partners of people with bipolar disorder are very similar. You are the ones who stay in the relationship instead of walking away. You are the main caretakers. When your partner is ill, you hold your lives together. You know the terrible fear of watching the person you love become someone you don't even recognize. When your partner is ill, you take care of the house, the finances, and the children—all the while having to hold your fear inside. Often, your partner is too ill to seek help. You call the doctors and sometimes the police. You make sure the prescriptions are filled and up-to-date and that everything is taken care of. This is a lot to ask of one person—and yet you, as the partner of a person with bipolar disorder, do it all the time. This book is for you.

### **Are You Tired?**

You may be worn-out from playing so many roles in your relationship. The goal of this book is to help you find the right balance between understanding and helping your partner so that you are still able to pursue your own goals and dreams. This book can provide you with the tools you need to be a resource and support for your partner instead of a crisis manager and constant caretaker.

It may be that your partner's bipolar disorder has been in control of your lives for years. You may have created ways of coping that no longer work.

This happens. With this book, however, you are going to learn a holistic treatment plan that can replace crisis control and mere coping. You *can* learn to change what isn't working into something that does. The tools in this book can show you how to best use your own strengths in combination with new techniques. By the time you finish all of the chapters, you will have a foundation for working with your partner to treat bipolar disorder holistically—a foundation that will help you create the stable and loving relationship you deserve.

## What Is a Holistic Treatment Plan?

As you undoubtedly know, traditional treatment for bipolar disorder focuses on medications. Certainly, medical treatment is essential and it's assumed that your partner is on medications and under the care of a doctor while you read this book. But, it's also known that many of you have partners who refuse to see their doctors or take medications, while some of you may be reading this book because your partner needs more than medications to achieve stability. The solution lies in a holistic treatment plan in which medications are one part of a plan that includes diet, exercise, sleep regulation, and lifestyle changes, as well as behavior changes and trigger recognition.

Holistic treatment is based on the belief that a person can't change one part of their life without changing all of it. When you use the holistic approach to treating bipolar disorder, your role as a partner becomes as important as any member of your partner's health care team. The good news is that many people with bipolar disorder can achieve stability once they have a treatment plan that helps them prevent the symptoms that characterize the disorder. The key is to have tools you both can use to find relief from the ups and downs of this illness. This book will give you these tools.

## The Correct Diagnosis

*Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder* is not designed as a diagnostic manual (although diagnosis will be discussed to a degree in chapter 3). Ideally, it is hoped that your partner has been diagnosed by a licensed psychiatrist, although, nowadays, many people are diagnosed by general practitioners or other mental health professionals, who may or may not have the necessary skills to treat the disorder. It is important for you to understand that while

some psychotherapists are qualified to diagnose (or treat) bipolar disorder, not all have sufficient training. It is important that your partner is evaluated by a mental health professional who specializes in treating severe mental illnesses. In other words, no matter who has diagnosed your partner, it is essential that the diagnosis be clear and correct.

## **How to Involve Your Partner**

At first, it may be hard for you to get your partner to use the tools in this book. As you probably know, there are many stages to bipolar disorder. It will help if you are clear about where your partner is right now on a stability scale of 1 to 10. If your partner is stable and wants to do this work with you, then the optimum rating of 10 applies, and you can do the work in this book together. If your partner is in the hospital or is otherwise too ill to participate with you, then the minimum rating of 1 applies, and you can use the book yourself and introduce the new techniques when your partner is more stable. If your partner is somewhere in the middle, use your own judgment. It's highly recommended that you read the book and make the changes in yourself first, and then introduce them to your partner at a later time; especially if your partner is not well enough to do the book with you from the beginning.

### *Crisis Situations*

If you are currently in crisis—that is, if your partner has left, is in a severe episode, is in the hospital, has stopped medications, or is refusing your help—naturally, you will use this book in a different way. If you are in this type of crisis, focus on yourself first and make the recommended changes on your own. Then, when things calm down, you can introduce the changes to your partner. If your partner is stable and you plan to work with this book together, celebrate: you have a great start.

## **The Reality of Bipolar Disorder**

Always remember that although bipolar disorder behavior is frustrating and destructive, it's not purposeful, nor is its presence meant to punish you or

anyone else. When someone is in the middle of a mood swing, compassion goes a long way. It helps to keep this in mind as you begin working with this book.

*Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder* is not a quick fix. It's easy to be hopeful and excited about something new, but when it becomes difficult (or your partner does not respond immediately), it's also easy to revert to old patterns where you alone must do everything to keep your relationship together. Or maybe your partner is too ill to respond. If that is the case, or if your partner is under extreme stress or their thinking is distorted, they may be unable to do the work. Naturally, this will frustrate you. But you are not alone. At first, many partners of those with bipolar disorder must do the work by themselves.

## **This Work Takes Time**

In this book, you will be asked to rethink your current lifestyle and the way you react and respond to your partner when they are ill. You may need some time to adjust to new ideas. In fact, making healthy adjustments and relearning how to live with your partner may take more time than you think it should, but significant change can and often does take place if you are patient.

Go easy on yourself. Many of the techniques discussed here will produce immediate results, especially if your partner is stable and willing to work with you. Others may take many attempts to see tangible results. Your goal is to create a foundation for treating bipolar disorder slowly and calmly; one that focuses on prevention instead of crisis control. Remind yourself to focus on the solution, not the problem. Problems are immediate—solutions take time. Here are some of the qualities you will need while you are creating your holistic treatment plan:

- An open mind and the willingness to try new ideas to treat an old problem.
- Enough time to learn a new way to live with bipolar disorder.
- The courage to grieve the loss of some of the hopes and dreams you had for your relationship, while simultaneously taking decisive action to improve the relationship.

- A journal in which you can explore your ideas, thoughts, and emotions, and in which you will complete the important journal exercises you will find in each chapter.

**Why keep a journal?** Keeping a journal can seem like a lot of work at first, but it is an essential part of this program. The ideas and lists you write in this journal will become the basis for your treatment plan. Here are some of the many good reasons for using a journal to help you create a new treatment plan for bipolar disorder:

- You are a student and students take notes.
- Writing and drawing in a journal allows you to say things you would never say out loud; journals are private.
- Journals help you get some perspective on what is you and what is bipolar disorder.
- Journals let you cry and complain without bothering other people; journals don't hurt other people's feelings.
- Journals are a very safe place to explore very serious topics.
- Writing things down helps you prevent fires instead of having to put them out all of the time.
- Journals help you create a plan; plans loosen the control bipolar disorder has on your relationship.
- The pen is mightier than the sword and bipolar disorder has a really big sword.
- Your journal can be your friend when your partner is too ill to be the friend you need.

## Some Helpful Advice

The odds are very good that you are starting this book with a lot of hope. One reason people frequently don't finish books with the same kind of hopeful enthusiasm they start with is that the reality of their situation starts to weigh them down, and hopelessness creeps in. It helps if you can make a

deal with yourself right now that you don't have to practice all of the techniques presented here at once. You simply can't. No one can.

You will probably want to get started immediately and that energy is great, but if you can channel that energy into doing each chapter slowly and thoroughly, one step at a time, you can keep your hope alive. Implement the ideas chapter by chapter. They really do build on each other. Give yourself plenty of time to see the important changes. Use your journal every day.

If you have children, teach them journaling techniques and let them write about their feelings about bipolar disorder. If they are old enough, make sure you include them in your new treatment plan. Children may seem too young to understand what is going on, but you may find that involving them in positive action plans that help your partner get better will also reassure your children. Most of all, keep your hope alive. This is a tough but very treatable illness. With the right combination of medications and a holistic treatment plan, you and your partner can work toward the relationship you wanted when you first got together.

Treating bipolar disorder holistically is not about what is wrong with your relationship. It is about what bipolar disorder has done to your relationship and about creating a treatment plan that takes power away from the disorder. This plan can help you maintain your perspective when your partner is ill. Treating bipolar disorder realistically is about remembering what is good in your relationship and why you began it in the first place.

## A Final Note

**TREAT BIPOLAR DISORDER FIRST:** This is a phrase you will see often in this book. It means that because of the seriousness of the illness, you and your partner must make it your top priority to focus on treating and managing bipolar disorder, so that your relationship can achieve stability. To end the control that the disorder has on your relationship requires that you use all of the tools you can find to prevent bipolar disorder symptoms. Appropriate medical treatment is a big part of treating the disorder first, as are the action plans you will find in each chapter.

You are now ready to get started. The treatment system you are about to create will give you the tools you need to take action and can make a big difference in your life and your partner's. You *can* do it.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Treat Bipolar Disorder First

*If you want to have a happy, healthy, and stable relationship, you have to treat bipolar disorder first.*

Bipolar disorder is very predictable. If you are currently in the middle of a stressful situation, this may be impossible to believe, but it really is a predictable and often very treatable illness. Life with bipolar disorder may feel like a roller-coaster ride and it may cause terrible problems in your relationship, but once you learn the patterns of the disorder and specific strategies to treat the mood swings and their symptoms, you have a good chance of creating a stable and healthy relationship based on love, joy, and growth, instead of one based on living from crisis to crisis.

### **What Does “Treat Bipolar Disorder First” Mean?**

When your partner is ill, their beliefs about themselves and the world are often distorted. If you try to talk with them about your relationship, work,

or life in general, you often talk to the bipolar disorder instead of to the person you love. When you treat bipolar disorder first, with strategies that help both of you notice and ultimately prevent mood swings, your partner can become more rational and be more of the person you love. Then, you can discuss issues and be assured that your partner is responding from who they are, instead of from what the illness tells them to say (or do). Learning practical strategies to treat bipolar disorder first helps you build a stable foundation that is in place when the next bipolar storm hits. The building of this foundation starts when you examine where your relationship is right now and where you want it to be in the future.

### **Building a Stable Foundation**

Your first goal is to get a clear picture of how bipolar disorder currently affects your relationship. This will help you decide what you want to change initially and recognize what you will need to do to get started. (Your journal will help you with this process, so have it ready.) When you talk honestly with your partner about how bipolar disorder has affected both your relationship and you personally, you set the cornerstone for your new foundation. As with all the suggestions in this book, if you can't talk directly with your partner at first, you can use your journal and trusted friends or a therapist to begin exploring the issues.

### **Think about Bipolar Disorder Realistically**

Have you ever thought rationally about the sacrifices you are willing to make to create the stability your partner needs to treat this illness? Or does it seem that the ups and downs of the disorder only allow you to live day to day? Have you thought about what must change for you to continue in this relationship? Have you ever discussed the main issues you struggle with regarding bipolar disorder?

It helps to get your feelings out in the open and on paper so you can discuss, realistically, the toll this illness has taken on your relationship. It also helps to know how committed you are to helping your partner prevent mood swings in the future. The foundation for healing is based on complete honesty. You will have to ask yourself some tough questions to get started. Then, this book will help you find the tools you need to handle the issues

these questions bring up for you. Your first journal exercise will give you an idea of how you are currently feeling about bipolar disorder and the role it plays in your life.

## **EXERCISE: Bipolar Disorder and Your Relationship**

Answer the following questions in your journal: *How has bipolar disorder affected my relationship as a whole? How has it affected me as a person? What is the hardest thing that I face daily regarding this illness? What do I want to see change right now? What do I need in my own life to find happiness? If things stay as they are, where do I see my relationship in the future? What is going well?*

Your answers will help you focus on the areas of your relationship that need immediate help. You can then use the techniques discussed in this book to make the necessary changes to move your relationship where you want it to be in the future. If you feel that your partner is well enough to answer the questions with you, first answer them separately, and then talk about your answers together. This will help you both get started in the direction you want to take while you are working with the book.

## **What Major Issues Do You Face?**

Thinking about the major issues in your relationship that are caused by your partner's bipolar disorder will help you understand what is working and what is not. You can learn to recognize what you can and can't do. When you are clear about what you need, you will be able to talk to your partner rationally and compassionately about a plan that will treat the illness first. You will be able to tell your partner exactly what you need and you will get a realistic picture of what your partner can do on their own.

It helps if you can think of this process as a negotiation between the two of you. Remember, you are reading this book because your partner has an illness that needs treatment. Be gentle. This may be the first time that you have ever really talked with your partner about *your* needs. Talking with your partner about these needs is not about blaming your partner, especially if they are not ready for change. Instead, it is about your needs and the changes you are ready to make. It can be a positive experience.

One way to introduce the subject of your needs to your partner would be to talk about what you personally want to do in the future to treat the

illness in order to minimize its impact on your lives. Remember, you must be honest about what you will do and what you would like your partner to do to treat bipolar disorder first. It may help to think of your needs as agreements you can make with yourself and your partner. This can take the pressure off the two of you and may lead to more rational and positive discussions. Here are some positive examples of how to approach discussing what you are willing to do to help your partner find stability:

- I'm willing to learn new techniques to help you get well.
- I understand that bipolar disorder is an illness, and I'm willing to work with you instead of blaming you.
- I agree that I'll have to make some changes in my own lifestyle to help you stay stable (e.g., changes in social obligations, busyness, sleep habits, diet, exercise, and the use of caffeine, alcohol, and drugs such as pot).
- I understand that the cost of not treating bipolar disorder far outweighs the cost of allowing things to stay as they are.
- I'm willing to try out the techniques described in this book for the next six months, and if you are still not ready at that time to make the changes needed, I will reevaluate my approach.
- I agree to examine my own emotional behavior to see what I may be doing to contribute to your bipolar disorder symptoms.
- I understand that you are ill and are not sick on purpose. I agree to remind myself of this when I'm frustrated with your progress.
- I'm willing to be more assertive with your health care team and to let them know that I need help and direction as much as you do.

As a couple, you can talk about what you both want and need from your relationship and what you think you will need to do in the future to treat bipolar disorder first—so that you both can find some stability. You will learn many new techniques in this book, but for the moment your focus should be on what you need for yourself and from each other. Here are some ideas of what you can decide to do together:

- We will learn to work on bipolar disorder together—as a team.
- We agree to use the techniques in this book even when they don't work immediately.
- We know that many positive changes can happen quickly, but we agree that it may take longer than we want to make the big changes.
- We agree that we love each other and we want to our relationship to be healthy and whole once again.
- We agree that we can't continue as we are if our relationship is to survive.

## Working Alone

If your partner isn't working with you at first, reading these ideas may be very frustrating (or depressing). This doesn't mean that the situation is hopeless. Being honest with yourself is a very powerful tool. There are many ideas contained within this book that you can use by yourself. You can then introduce these ideas to your partner when they are more stable. If you can't talk with your partner, use your journal to write about what you are willing and able to do. This will help you see where you are in *your* life and also to see what you can realistically give to your partner. Of course, if your partner is currently in the hospital, you will need to allow time before you introduce any new ideas, but you can certainly get started on your new behaviors and be ready when your partner comes home.

## Needs, Not Punishment

When you do talk with your partner about your needs and how you feel, be careful not to sound as if you are warning them about the consequences of their actions. That is, don't say, *You better do this or I'm going to leave*. Instead, try to talk to your partner in a loving way and let them know you are trying to take care of yourself and ensure that your relationship will be stronger in the future. When you treat bipolar disorder first, with compassion and the realistic tools you will learn in this book, you can learn to focus

on the positive and what works to help your partner stay stable, instead of punishing your partner for their bipolar disorder symptoms. You can then work together to create goals that will help you get to where you want to be in the future.

## Setting Goals

In life you are taught to make personal, financial, and physical goals. What no one tells you is that you have to make bipolar disorder goals as well. As the partner of someone with bipolar disorder, you need to create realistic goals that will reflect what you can and cannot do. As a couple, you can set goals that take into account the limitations of the illness. You probably know that untreated bipolar disorder is a goal wrecker. You may have had great plans for your relationship only to have found that the disorder ruined your plans over and over again. To counteract this, you must set clear, attainable, realistic goals that carefully consider the limitations that bipolar disorder puts on your relationship.

## What Are Goals?

**Goals are realistic:** For example, if you don't want to play the caretaker role any longer, this doesn't mean that you have only the choice to leave your partner. Instead, your goal could state that you will begin to set more realistic limits on how much you will do. Of course, it will be important to learn the new tools you will need to stop or diminish your caretaking role and learn to ask for help from others, but such changes start with stating a goal.

**Goals have a timeline:** For example, you might set a goal that states, "I want to have a more loving and stable relationship that is not controlled by bipolar disorder, and I'm willing to wait six months to see the changes before I make any major relationship decisions." Setting goals is a process, not only a result. The time it takes for you to reach your goal is just as important as reaching the finish line. Set a time limit and remember that all of the time before that time limit is part of the entire process.

**Goals can be dreams:** As long as you understand the true limitations bipolar disorder places on your partner, and you continue to believe that your

relationship is worth the work, your goals can take you where you want to go. They teach you to find success within limitations. So dream big, but dream realistically.

**Goals are attainable:** Your goals should always take into account the facts of bipolar disorder and not assume that the illness will just vanish one day. (Even though that would be really nice.)

**Goals take time:** Surely, you have heard the saying “Two steps forward, one step back.” When it comes to reaching goals, this is an accurate description. You cannot expect a straight trajectory into positive change. It is fairly certain that you will take a lot of winding roads, but if you are ready for the setbacks and disappointments along the way, you can reach your destination.

One way to reach large goals is to break them into smaller pieces. When something feels like it is too much to do or too hard, or it feels as if it is not working, do only a small part of it. Sometimes, on your path toward your goal you will be like a rocket, but at other times, it will feel as if you are crawling to your goal. This is normal. You can say to yourself, *I may be crawling today, but I'm still on my path.*

**Goals are different from plans:** Sometimes, a goal may seem impossible because there are so many roadblocks along the way. Many people quit trying to reach their goals when the problems seem impossible to fix. But one way to help yourself stay on track is to remember that it is not the goal that needs to change when things get tough. Instead, it is the plan that needs changing. Maybe you need new tools or a different way of looking at the situation. So remember, when reaching a goal such as achieving a more stable relationship seems difficult or impossible, your plans for how to arrive at your goal may have to change occasionally, but your goal can stay the same.

## EXERCISE: Explore Your Goals

Treating bipolar disorder first in your relationship is a lifelong process. In order to decrease the control that bipolar disorder has over your life, your goals can help you to focus on what you need to do immediately. Now, using your journal, write down your goals for your relationship. Here are some examples of the goals you can set for yourself:

## Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder

- I want a loving relationship where bipolar disorder is just an illness my partner and I manage together. I'm willing to do what it takes to make this happen.
- I want to be in a relationship where we are equal partners and I'm not a caretaker, so I will do whatever it takes to make this happen.
- I want us to travel together in a healthy way. I would like to do this within the next year.
- I want a relationship where out-of-control anger and violence are not options. I will no longer accept out-of-control anger or violence in this relationship. This starts now—today.
- I'm going to learn about the role of diet and exercise in mood swings by educating myself and asking questions.
- I want to learn more about my partner's medications and their side effects.
- I would like to be more assertive with my partner's health care team to let them know what I need from them. I will remind myself not to get intimidated when I see my partner's doctor, and I will have my list of questions ready.
- I want to help my partner find stability by examining our lifestyle.
- I want to understand and accept the fact that my partner cannot work right now, and I want to learn how I can help our family deal with this financially.
- I want my relationship with my partner to be stable for our children. I want to involve them in this healing process.
- I want to spend time with my partner—not with my partner and bipolar disorder.
- I want a normal sex life that is about passion and love, not about bipolar disorder symptoms.
- I want to track our money so that we do not have to go through another financial emergency. I'm going to start educating myself on what I can do to create a financial plan.

- I will not let bipolar disorder make any more decisions in my relationship.
- I'm going to maintain perspective. I may have years and years of old behavior to change and it's going to take time. I give myself that time to reach my goals.

You and your partner both need your own separate goals as well as the goals that you will work on together to make your relationship stronger and more stable. These goals will help you explore the reality of the limitations that the disorder places on your relationship. Create goals that focus on what you *can* do, instead of on what bipolar disorder makes it impossible for you to do.

## Project Your Goals into the Future

The next step is to project your goals into the future. For example, if you want to deal with your finances, so you can be safe in case your partner cannot work, look at where you want to be in six months, a year, and five years. Ask yourself, *If I don't make these changes and I'm still in financial trouble in six months, can I live with that?* Or if you want a more loving and stable relationship, project into the future to see where you will be in one year. Ask yourself, *If my relationship is not more loving and stable in one year, can I live with that?* This will help you understand how strong your desire is and will remind you that it will take daily work to meet your future goals. It is really important to examine the cost of not changing—of staying the same. Ask yourself what the cost to you and your family will be in the future if you do not treat bipolar disorder first. Picture yourself five years from now, if things do not change.

You may feel overwhelmed as you contemplate the future. This is normal. Anyone in your situation would feel overwhelmed. When it comes to treating this illness, the secret to dealing with the feeling of being overwhelmed is to let yourself off the hook by saying, *I'll just do what I can do right now. Bit by bit. I don't have to do this book all at once. I just have to do what I can.* You can even create a set response for when you feel overwhelmed by all that you want to change in your relationship. You can say to yourself, *I'm so proud that I'm starting to learn new ways to help myself and my partner. I can give myself the time it takes to make these changes and I accept that this is the first step.*