

## Being A Bipolar Christian

Thousands of people suffer from a bipolar condition (severe mood swings). How can Christians deal with this malady? Can the Lord cure them, or are there biblical principles for dealing with this condition?

### AT ISSUE

I am 48 years old and my life has been a roller coaster of bad decisions, one after another. I have been diagnosed as having a bipolar disorder which means I have huge mood swings. Now that I understand a little about what's wrong with me, I have a lot of questions as to where to go from here.

I have believed in Jesus all my life but due to the lack of medication to help me follow through with proper decisions I relied on my personal emotions and that did not work.

I need to know how to find out what type of training is best for me in order to support myself successfully (on one job for more than 3 years). I need stability in my life to have well being in my bipolar state. Where do I start? What do I look for? How do I judge what I am doing? I am on Depokate and I find myself second guessing myself.

### OUR INSIGHT

Bless you. I can tell already that you have the right approach to things because of the way you signed your letter. You recognize you are "in Christ" regardless of your emotional problems, and that's a great place to be!

Nevertheless, you bring up some very practical questions, and I want to deal with them as well as I can. The first thing I'd like to share with you is that I believe I bring some understanding to the issues you have. I was trained in Pastoral Care and Counseling at Princeton Theological Seminary, and this included clinical pastoral training at Trenton State Psychiatric Hospital. I later did an internship at a home for socially and emotionally disturbed adolescent girls in Elizabeth, N.J. So I am very familiar with your bipolar condition.

Does this mean that I have all the answers to your questions? No, it merely means I understand your questions. I think it's exceedingly important that you rely on the advice of your doctor and continue to take your medicine. We need to discuss that issue from a Christian perspective.

## Will Faith Save You From Bipolarism?

For those not familiar with the term "bipolar," it is simply the fancy name for mood swings. But these are not small mood swings like most people experience, but large ones that go from one extreme to another. Another common name for this malady is "manic-depressive disorder." During the manic phase sufferers are highly animated both mentally and physically, disorganized, often in an uncontrolled or uncontrollable state. Then, after a time of this mania, the mood changes to a depressed state and people fall into a lethargy and sometimes become suicidal.

So, should you depend on faith to keep you under control or prayer to cure you? Yes, but with your faith needs to be accompanied by works according to James 2. For you that means listening to your doctor. In a manic phase you will think you know more than him or her, in the depressed phase you will not be able to tune in with any clarity to what he or she has to say. There is an old saying that, "God does the healing, but the doctor takes the fee." I believe this is true, and you need to keep faith in the fact that God is working through the doctors. Does God trust doctors? Well, we know he held Luke the physician in high enough esteem to allow him to write the third Gospel, and that counts for something!

Is your doctor a Christian? Great if he or she is, but that should not be the determining factor since he or she is working on your body, not your soul. But you may want to seek out a Christian doctor if you think it will influence you listen to him or her more at your most manic or depressed moments. It's always a good thing to know that your doctor is praying for you as he or she treats you.

## What About The Meds?

One of the key things you can do to retain your emotional balance is to continue to take your meds. You say you are on Depakote, which many believe is the best possible med, though new drugs are coming out all the time. The old alternative, Lithium, did not allow the same precision in treatment. However, after a while on meds, you will think you're well, and you'll be tempted to go off them and your roller-coaster ride will begin again. Often people go off their meds because of side-effects. Depakote has some, including nausea, drowsiness and dizziness. Pregnant women shouldn't normally be on it nor people with liver ailments. Check with your doctor about other possible side-effects, and get his advice if you experience them.

But here is a simple question that you can easily answer when your moods swings are under control. That is, what's worse, nausea or mania? Regardless of the side-effects you need to retain your faith that the meds are the lesser of two evils. In his love and his mercy, the Lord allowed these medicines to be invented, and you need to receive each one into your mouth with sacramental joy. They are a gift from God as surely as the bread and wine you take at communion.

## Your Path In Life

You probably felt real relief when you were diagnosed as being bipolar. As you say, your life was chaotic, and you and the people around you must have thought you were crazy! But you are not crazy. You simply have a chemical imbalance. Lots of people have chemical imbalances in their bodies, though of course it is much more serious when the chemicals are the ones in your brain.

But are you useless to the Lord and to society? Of course not! You can keep those brain chemicals in balance with the Depakote for the manic side and whatever medications you are given for the depression side. The balance will probably never be "perfect" because you do have a malady, but your success in living will be directly related to your attitude about those pills. Like he did with Jesus in the wilderness, Satan will tempt you to do it on your own. But like Jesus, you should not put God to the test (Matthew 4:7), but simply trust Him.

So, where should you start? With taking your meds religiously. What training should you get? That has little to do with your bipolar condition. Take some vocational tests and see what you're suited for. With that information, pick some career that you like. It's really that simple. By the way, you say you've been working the same place for three years, and that's pretty good. Sounds like you're already a success in your work. But don't be afraid to begin new career adventures if you want.

What next? Well, the first thing you must do is forget all the bad decisions of the past. Paul had it exactly right in Romans 8:1 when he said, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free..." You have already said you are "in Christ," so I know for sure this verse applies to you. Move ahead with faith and confidence.

-DLH