

BeyondBipolar Newsletter

*clarity and hope
for those challenged
by bipolar disorder*

© Jane Mountain, MD, 2006

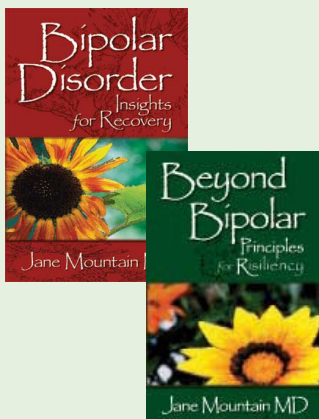
Contents

Street Knowledge Article
pp.1, 3-4

Support for the Supporters
pp. 2, 5-6

Upcoming Seminars Alert
p. 2

New Book by Dr. Mountain
will be released soon
p. 2



Welcome to *BeyondBipolar*, a Newsletter focused on mental wellness for those who experience bipolar personally and in their families.

This month's Newsletter presents two articles about finding the "Street Knowledge" for living with bipolar disorder. It also has information about **Upcoming Seminars** (see page 2 in this newsletter for more details) and other speaking engagements by Dr. Mountain.

Successful Peer Groups Provide Street Knowledge

It's often difficult to find the knowledge we need to live with bipolar disorder on a daily basis. Sure, we can find medical information, but who's going to help us manage the nitty-gritty parts of life that are made more challenging with bipolar disorder? I call this kind of knowledge "street knowledge". Street knowledge about bipolar disorder can make the difference between feeling stuck and finding clarity and hope.

You can gain street knowledge from others who are challenged with bipolar disorder—your peers. One excellent way to learn the street knowledge you need is to connect with others through support or recovery groups that are focused on these 3 elements: education, peer empowerment and problem solving around life challenges. (To read the full article, turn to page 3.)

For Family And Friends

“Support for the Supporter”

You don’t have to have bipolar disorder yourself to need support in getting street knowledge about bipolar disorder. As a friend or family member of someone who has bipolar disorder, you may feel that you are alone in dealing with the challenges you face.

The one you love may seem to be needing help and not recognize that need. You may find yourself hyper-vigilant for symptoms and wondering when the next crisis will occur.

Or perhaps you are in the middle of handling a crisis and wonder whether you are finding the best help possible. You crave the street knowledge you need to live with this situation on a day-to-day basis, but you aren’t sure where to find help. (To read the entire article, turn to p. 5.)

Share BeyondBipolar Newsletter With Others

If you are on the email list for the newsletter, go to the email you received and click on “forward email” in the lower left corner. If you are not yet signed up for the email list, go to www.bipolar.com and click on e-newsletter.

The archive of previous issues can be found at www.bipolar.com.

If you wish to use articles for your website or to print more than 50 copies, please ask permission by emailing beyondbipolar@mac.com.

Beyond Bipolar: Principles for Resiliency

Dr. Mountain’s new book brings you street knowledge, and will help you to go *beyond bipolar* to mental wellness. Watch for its release.

Seminars by Jane Mountain, MD!

Seminars planned for Denver

A variety of seminars about bipolar disorder are being planned for the near future. Come gain clarity and hope for recovery.

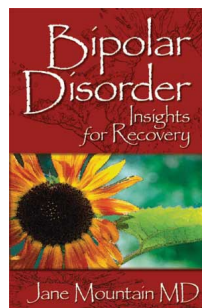
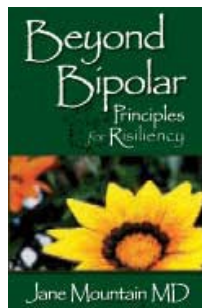
Here’s what others have said about Dr. Mountain’s seminars:

“Thank you for the information you shared on Saturday morning. Despite being a psychology major 30 years ago, reading many books on bipolar, there were basic concepts that remained unclear to me. You are a gifted speaker in using words that illuminate ideas.”

“I wanted to thank you again for the classes that you gave. I really benefited from each of them. Learning lots and identifying with many of the things you talked about. It was very helpful, and I do hope you offer other seminars in the future.”

Learn more about Dr. Mountain’s upcoming seminars and other speaking engagements, navigate to www.beyondbipolar.com, then go to the Schedule page.

Dr. Mountain’s new book, *Beyond Bipolar: Principles for Resiliency*, will be released soon. It will bring you street knowledge, and will help you to go *beyond bipolar* to mental wellness.



And don’t forget that Dr. Mountain’s first book, *Bipolar Disorder: Insights for Recovery*, can be purchased from Dr. Mountain’s website (www.beyondbipolar.com) or from Amazon.com.

Three Elements

of Successful Support or Recovery Groups

by Jane Mountain, M.D.

Support or recovery groups can boost your efforts toward recovery by providing a range of positive experiences. Here are three features you may want to look for in a group that is focused on living well with psychiatric challenges:

- *Education*
- *Peer empowerment*
- *Problem solving around life challenges*

Education

The first-rate education that can occur in a peer led support or recovery group is right off the street instead of from a medical textbook. Both types of education are valuable in managing the challenges of a psychiatric illness, and the best advice is to become an expert in the illness you are facing.

Becoming an expert consists of learning as much from the medical community about the your diagnosis and treatment as possible. It also includes learning about your personal illness experience. Medical knowledge is essential and helps you find and utilize treatment that is most appropriate. Street knowledge is what helps you live from day to day and minute to minute with the challenges of your illness.

Street knowledge embraces topics from how to keep from forgetting to take your medication to

how to explain your illness to your best friend. You may want to learn how to tell (or not tell) your boss about your diagnosis. You may be asking what to do when you feel stuck in recovery. Or how you can save money when medical bills are mounting. Or just what can you do for recreation (for free).

Within a safe environment of a high-quality support or recovery group, you can learn from and teach others the ins and outs of living with an illness. These lessons are part of an illness experience that goes beyond the textbook knowledge you may get from other sources. They may take place formally in a group with planned educational events or informally with conversations among members. Either way, street knowledge is where the rubber meets the road. It covers a host of questions that may never be answered in therapy. Street knowledge complements treatment, and is not a substitute for treatment.

Peer Empowerment

The wealth of support or recovery groups is peer empowerment. Peer empowerment is the currency of recovery. It has been shown to be an effective means, leading to better medical outcomes for individuals with psychiatric diagnoses. More importantly, peer empowerment is associated with greater satisfaction in life.

Peers might be those with the same or similar diagnoses. They could be friends or family members who are experiencing challenges due to the effects of a psychiatric diagnosis of someone they love. Peer empowerment recognizes the person beyond the diagnosis and encourages achievement of goals and dreams. Peers demonstrate mental wellness and recovery from illness. They share their own challenges and validate your struggles.

Like education, peer empowerment is a two way street. Identifying strengths in your peers can help you recognize your own strengths. Learning to have power over a psychiatric illness builds courage and determination that enable you to accomplish your recovery goals.

Problem Solving Around Life Challenges

A well-run support or recovery group will provide opportunities for problem solving. In fact, the recovery focus comes from consistently asking the question, "What are you doing to take care of yourself?" This question can prevent a group from bogging down into self-pity and unproductive venting of complaints about life or illness. Venting needn't be discouraged; nor should it be lacking the purpose of quickly getting to a point where challenges are identified so active problem solving can begin.

Problem solving in a group is not giving advice. The conversational tone includes phrases such as these:

- *I like the way you took care of yourself by coming tonight*
- *When I felt that way about my doctor, it helped me to write down my questions so I could ask them at my next appointment*
- *Have you ever tried going for a walk when you felt like screaming? I did that the other day and it saved my having a screaming fit. (The neighbors were glad to see me instead of hearing me!)*
- *Watching funny movies or calling friends have both helped me when I felt alone. What kinds of things help you when you are feeling so isolated?*

Problem solving respects that each individual finds unique solutions to problems. Problem solving can have four basic steps:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Brainstorming approaches
3. Choosing an approach
4. Evaluating the approach and continuing or choosing a different approach

Problem solving in a group of peers requires a safe and supportive environment where confidentiality is respected. It can jump-start your efforts toward recovery.

Add these Features to Your Recovery Group

These are but three features of a healthy support or recovery group. They are high-quality traits to nurture in the group you choose. If you are new to support or recovery groups and have not tried one, look for these qualities in the groups you visit. Take a chance on a support or recovery group. You just might find the inside track to street education, peer empowerment, and problem solving around life challenges.

Jane Mountain, MD, is the author of *Bipolar Disorder: Insights for Recovery* and *Beyond Bipolar: Principles for Recovery*. She is a regular contributor for the *ISBD Global*, newsletter of the International Society for Bipolar Disorders. Jane is the founder and one of the peer leaders of the Depression/Bipolar Recovery Group of Midtown Denver. Her website can be found at www.beyondbipolar.com.

© 2006 Jane Mountain, MD

Peer support isn't just for individuals who have bipolar disorder. If the person you love had diabetes or cancer, you would likely be attending some doctor visits together and even classes to help you with life style issues. Before I retired as a family physician, I sent many families to diabetes classes. What I learned was if a person wanted to manage diabetes as best as possible, it helped if the whole family knew what the illness was all about. It is easier said than done to adopt a new diet and life style to accommodate

sometimes overwhelm any attempts at simple problem solving. One of the most common outcomes that I have seen in my work is that family and friends become hyper-vigilant. Out of genuine concern, they take on responsibility for managing the illness, instead of continuing in the role as a resource for the person who experiences bipolar disorder.

In treating diabetes, the best outcomes are when those with diabetes learn to manage their illness. This involves learning a host of skills from giving shots, to keeping track of blood sugars, to determining a balance of insulin doses with exercise. All of these activities are part of the medical knowledge of learning to live with diabetes. To become functional adults with diabetes, these skills are essential.

There is also the "street knowledge" of living with diabetes. How does one go on a vacation where routine can be interrupted? How about working extra hours, where not taking a meal break can mess things up? How does a child with diabetes manage a sleepover without having good control of diabetes go haywire?

Bipolar has many similarities to diabetes. Plenty of medical information is needed, and "street knowledge" of how to manage daily living is a must. The difference comes in that formal education and training is rarely available for the family and friends, and even for the person who has bipolar disorder. This is in spite of the fact that research continues to confirm that education can decrease the number of hospitalizations, improve medication adherence and lead to a better quality of life.

Like diabetes, it is the person who has bipolar disorder who needs to learn to take charge of managing the illness. Family and friends can play a valuable support function, but on

Peer Support for Supporters

by Jane Mountain, MD

diabetes, but it is always easier if family members and friends are involved.

Unfortunately, in our society, we have treated psychiatric challenges differently from other health challenges. Too frequently, they are "do it yourself" illnesses. Family members and friends often become caretakers in crisis situations, but they are rarely given training to help them know what to do. Without accurate knowledge of how to proceed, they are on their own to problem solve and figure out what's important at a given time.

Ideally, just as in diabetes, a person with bipolar disorder would have support from family and community. In reality, lack of education about the disorder, often leads to heightened misunderstandings. Anxiety in a family or friendships facing bipolar disorder can rise to the point that strong emotions

a day-to-day basis, they cannot lead another's illness experience. There may be intermittent times of crisis when someone has to take over the management role, but in the best-case scenario, the person with bipolar disorder (if an adult) assigns this responsibility to family and friends in advance, along with written instructions of how to manage.

So where do family members and get the street knowledge they need? Supporters need peer support as well as those with bipolar disorder. Finding other supporters helps give perspective to the illness experience that goes far beyond the identified person with bipolar disorder. For best results, bipolar disorder cannot remain a "do it yourself" illness.

As with peer support for those who have bipolar disorder, support groups for those who are supporters need to have a focus on education, peer empowerment and problem solving around life challenges. A balanced recovery group for individuals with bipolar disorder focuses on the question, "What are you doing to take care of yourself?" This question is a good starting point for support groups for family members and friends as well.

In my experience as a family member, it was very difficult to continue to take care of myself when my concerns were for a relative who was extremely ill. Being reminded to take care of myself rather than thinking of my family member 24/7 was not a message I heard often. In the recovery group I founded, this is our first and foremost message to family members. Take care of yourself first. It's like putting on the oxygen mask first in a plane before helping another person. You have to get some fresh air by doing things to stay healthy first and foremost.

Even when a loved one is in the hospital (perhaps especially at that time) it is OK to get away

from your concerns by going out to dinner or enjoying something recreational. It's beneficial to get together with peers to share war stories, but the focus needs to be primarily on what you are doing to take care of yourself. Education, peer empowerment and problem solving around life challenges are for you too.

So what can you do?

- Look for a group of people who are facing similar challenges
- Join an existing support group or form one either formally or informally so you can learn and share the street knowledge of how to live with someone who has bipolar disorder
- Get help for yourself so you are not always focusing on the person who has bipolar disorder (This gives that person a bit of a breather as well.)
- Actively solve problems with others who have or are dealing with similar issues (This is where the rubber meets the road in street knowledge.)
- Look for help from organizations that support those dealing with mental health challenges (For a list of these groups, go to the "links" page on www.beyondbipolar.com. They include NAMI, DBSA, NMHA, CABF and others.)

Above all, take care of yourself!

The material in this Newsletter is copyrighted. However, permission is granted to copy for non-commercial use. For all other purposes, please email Dr. Mountain at beyondbipolar@mac.com.

© 2006 Jane Mountain, MD