

So What's With Bipolar Illness, Work and School?

by Jane Mountain, MD

Myths abound about those of us who have bipolar disorder and want to work or go to school. In my volunteer work with people with depression and bipolar disorder, I see untruths perpetuated throughout our society. The myths make me mad because:

- They prevent people from fulfilling their potential.
- They contribute to isolation among those with bipolar illness.
- They result in loss of promotion or inability to continue in school.
- They contribute to job loss and dropping out.
- They cause people on disability to lose hope that they can ever work again or complete their education.
- They prevent people with disabilities from escaping poverty.

I am spitting mad that I keep hearing people with advanced degrees and people with extreme giftedness but no degrees are stopped short in their tracks due to misinformation. This mythology deserves to be busted, so people with bipolar disorder can claim their right to be contributing members in society through

work and to fulfill their dreams through education. So here are my myth busters for those of you who want to work or complete your education:

For those applying for work:

- You do NOT have to tell an employer you have a disability before you are hired. Doing may mean you will not get hired, no matter how qualified you are.
- You DO have to be able to meet job requirements with or without accommodation. Accommodations can be simple and include things such as a quiet work environment, a note taker for training sessions, and a flexible schedule. I knew someone who had the accommodation of going to work early before other employees were present. He was able to do his job better without distractions.

- IF you want accommodations, you DO have to tell an employer you have a disability (but, of course, you do this after you have been given the job—make it in writing). It is best to consult some of the following resources before you do this:

1. Job Accommodation Network. These folks will help you figure out what accommodations will be helpful for you. <http://askjan.org/>
2. A disability occupation expert.
3. A disabilities lawyer.

- You can apply for jobs with the federal government using Schedule A, which allows to you avoid pages of application forms. The President has ordered government agencies to hire people with disabilities in larger numbers and this is one way for agencies to fulfill this requirement.

For those working or in school:

- No matter what an employer or school official tells you, bipolar disorder IS covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These laws protect most employees of most employers with 15 or more workers. Do research to find out if you are protected.
- You may ask for appropriate accommodations if you need them, but you MUST disclose that you have a disability in order to have legal protection (read For those applying for work above). This is a two edged sword in the work place, since disclosing can lead to job loss, but not disclosing can also lead to job loss if you cannot perform your job without accommodations. Consult a disabilities specialist or lawyer if you aren't certain what to

do. Look for the safest way to assert your legal rights.

- Carefully document your treatment at work if you feel you are being discriminated against because of your illness. Do not make threats to an employer or school personnel. Become educated about your legal rights and how to claim them. Then you can educate your employer or school personnel so they will know how to help you.
- If you feel you have been discriminated against because of your disability after you have disclosed to your employer that you have a disability, the step you need to take is to contact the EEOC (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). The EEOC is a law enforcement agency, and they will review the validity of your case and bring charges when appropriate. <http://www.eeoc.gov/>
- If you have been discriminated against because you are perceived by your employer to have a disability, you are also protected by the ADA.

For those who are on disability (SSI/SSDI) or are collecting private disability insurance:

- You can still work or go to school. You need to find out how much you can earn without jeopardizing your benefits. To get help with this, call Social Security and ask how to locate a benefits manager who can tell you exactly what you

can and cannot do to protect your benefits. Benefits managers do not work for the Social Security Administration, and talking with them will not affect your benefits.

- You can use your Ticket to Work. (Yes, you do have one, even if you have never heard of this program.) The Ticket to Work allows for a trial period of work and a gradual transition to work if you wish to get off of disability or if you want to keep your disability but work at the same time. <http://www.yourtickettowork.com/>
- You can join an Employment Network (EM) with your Ticket to Work. <http://www.yourtickettowork.com/endir> Your EM will offer services and support for your work experience.
- If you also receive private disability insurance payments, read your contract to make certain you do not jeopardize your benefits.

For those who want an education and for their parents:

- If your child with bipolar disorder is having difficulty in school, you can request a test for learning disabilities, and the school, according to law, has to provide this. Many children with bipolar disorder have dyslexia, learning disabilities and/or social disabilities. I know a child with genius level IQ in the lowest reading group. His teacher

thought he was below average in intelligence. This is a set up for poor school performance and behavioral issues. After testing showed dyslexia and learning disability, the child received help and subsequently graduated from college. The sooner you can get help, the better. This child was helped in second grade.

- Schools are required to develop an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for children with disabilities who are having difficulty with school. Learn more and insist this is done appropriately and followed. Need help? <http://www.ffcmh.org/>
- For adolescents with bipolar disorder who can't get out of bed in the morning in order to attend traditional high school, think of other options such as a community college during evening hours. Discuss with parents and counselors whether there are alternate, online or other types of schooling available to you.
- While in college, utilize your school's disability services, especially if you want to go to grad school. Even if you think you don't need them, utilizing them will ensure you can get the help you need as you approach such obstacles as testing. If you haven't been utilizing disability services, but you need an untimed test for the GRE, LSAT, MCAT or others, it will be harder to make your case.