

# 6

## Avoid Things That Make You Feel Worse

In this chapter you will:

- ✓ Learn about things you do that might worsen your mood.
- ✓ Identify things you say to yourself that can make your symptoms worse.
- ✓ Discover new ways to deal with hopeless and suicidal thoughts.

There are things you can do to make yourself feel better, but there are also many things you can do to make your symptoms worse. For example, when you are feeling blue, watching movies with tragic themes, listening to sad songs, or thinking about past losses can feed your depression. Your low mood might make you gravitate toward these things, but exposing yourself to them will only make you feel worse.

Similarly, if you are feeling irritable, going to places that are noisy and crowded, watching television news, or being around people with negative attitudes can make you feel crankier. You might tell yourself, “I’m already in a bad mood, so what difference will it make?” But if you want to feel better, you can start by figuring out how not to make your mood worse.

In this chapter, you will learn about common thoughts and actions that can worsen symptoms of bipolar disorder. Some may sound familiar to you, and others may be behaviors or ideas you’ve never associated with mood swings. For example, when some people enter an up or manic phase, they often crave nighttime activity and stimulation, but these things can make their symptoms more intense and harder to control. That’s because losing nighttime sleep can escalate hypomania and mania. Even if you try to take naps to compensate

for sleep loss, disruptions in your normal sleep–wake cycle have been shown to make mood swings worse.

When you are able to detect the early signs of a mood swing (see Chapters 3 and 4), your next order of business should be to not make them worse. As you read through the examples in this chapter, make a list of things you want to try to avoid or habits you want to try to break. Add them to your plan to gain control of your mood swings.

## What You Say to Yourself That Can Make Mood Swings Worse

It is human nature to talk ourselves into things. When we are feeling good, we can convince ourselves that everything will be OK or that our favorite sports teams are going to win. When we are in a bad mood, we can convince ourselves that we are destined to fail or that there is nothing we can do to help ourselves when faced with tough situations. We are very good at persuading ourselves even when there is no real evidence to support our ideas. We trust our gut instincts or feelings because sometimes we are right.

Unfortunately, this tendency can make things worse when it works against efforts to control your mood symptoms. Below are some things that people say to themselves when they are faced with making decisions about managing their mood disorders such as bipolar disorder. If any of them are things you have said to yourself, think about how these ideas might interfere with your goal of controlling your mood swings. Make an effort to reason through counterproductive thoughts rather than relying on your feelings to guide you.

### *“I Don’t Have a Mental Illness.”*

If you have had the unpleasant experience of being given bad news such as a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, then you are probably familiar with the feeling of resisting an idea. A diagnosis of a chronic mental illness is hard to hear, even if you think it is correct. It is natural to psychologically and emotionally push it away, even after years of living with the illness and receiving treatment for it. This is usually called denial, and it tends to make matters worse.

Denial is a normal coping response when we receive information that is emotionally and psychologically unacceptable. Denial protects us from the discomfort that comes with having to accept something unpleasant, painful, or inconsistent with how we think about ourselves. It is denial that is operating when you can’t sleep and you look exhausted but you tell people, “I’m fine. No, really, I’m fine.” When your mood is highly irritable and you feel agitated and have racing thoughts, denial is doing its job when you tell yourself, “It’s not me. Everyone else is just getting on my nerves.” When you know that you need medication to resolve your depression, but you don’t want to take it, you use denial to convince yourself that you are feeling better and that the episode “will pass.”

Denial usually operates unconsciously. Because you may not realize that you are doing it, it can be hard to fix. To keep denial in check, listen to your own words when you talk

about your mood symptoms. When you feel bad but tell others that you are “OK,” you are denying that you have a problem. While you may deny feeling bad to try to reduce your family members’ worry, you are also trying to persuade yourself that nothing is wrong. Rather than resist the idea that you are having mood symptoms, follow your doctor’s treatment advice and learn new skills to control mood swings. If you think you may be in denial about your mood swings, the exercises in Chapter 12 might help you learn more about how to ease into acceptance.

### *“I’m Tired of Trying.”*

The low energy, loss of motivation, mental slowness, and hopelessness that are brought about by depression can also convince you that you would be better off if you didn’t take medicine, stopped going to doctors, and gave up on the endless struggle to control your illness. The effort it takes to manage your illness can leave you mentally and emotionally exhausted at times. To cope with these feelings, some people take breaks from trying to control their illness. For a few days they feel a sense of freedom, but unfortunately, this usually makes matters worse.

Wanting to give up because you’re tired of trying is a normal feeling. People feel that way when they are tired of their jobs, tired of school, tired of taking care of small children, tired of trying to get out of debt, and tired of trying to find the right partner. If you’re facing these kinds of life struggles along with trying to control your illness, you have the right to be especially exhausted. Life can be very hard. To cope with these times, you have to add positives to your life to balance out all the negatives. If you have some good things to look forward to, people who give you pleasure or make you smile, reasons to rush home after a long day at work, these things will help you hang in there and put out the effort to be at your best. If you lack positives in your life, it’s time to add them. A few examples are provided in Chapter 15, but use your imagination to make your life worth the effort it takes to stay well.

If you are tired of trying because you are not getting what you need out of medication treatment or psychotherapy, rather than giving up, perhaps you should consider making a change. Start by sharing your concerns with your clinician before you stop any treatments on your own. Keep in mind that stopping medications suddenly can put you at risk for a relapse. If you have worked with your clinician and are still unsatisfied, it may be time to get another opinion.

## **It’s Time to Make a Change**

It is normal to want change in your life from time to time. We all get the urge to change our hairstyle, move to a new place, repaint our house, rearrange our furniture, learn a new hobby, change jobs, or otherwise make our lives more interesting. Most of the time there is nothing wrong with change. It can become a negative, however, if too many changes are attempted at the same time or if those changes are not well thought out and lead to bigger problems.

Mood swings that are associated with hypomania or mania often include a flood of new ideas and impulsivity—the tendency to act before thinking. When reasoning is colored by an up mood, dramatic changes such as quitting your job, having an affair, or buying something expensive can all seem reasonable and justified. However, giving in to a big urge can make matters worse.

### *Create Emotional Distance*

One strategy for coping with the urge to change is to put some time between having an idea for change and taking action on it. During that pause you have time to think through the change you are considering, consider the pros and cons, and make a decision that is best for you. Exercise 6.1 (below) includes some questions you might consider when you feel the urge to make a major change in your life.

### *The 24-Hour Rule*

The 24-hour rule is an agreement that you make with yourself or with the important people in your life to hold off 24 hours on making decisions or taking actions that involve doing something that you would not normally do, that others would object to, or that may involve some risks. If something is a good idea today, it will be a good idea tomorrow, so a 24-hour delay should not cause any harm. The 24-hour delay gives you time to use the other methods in this workbook to sort through your thoughts so that when you make a decision to act, it will not be something you later regret. If 24 hours is not enough time, make it a 48-hour rule. Tommy uses the 24-hour rule before he gives in to his urge to travel. Raquel uses the 24-hour rule when she gets the urge to overspend at the mall. Amanda uses the 24-hour rule before scolding her husband. She figures if an issue is worth risking marital conflict over, it

#### **EXERCISE 6.1** Is Change a Good Idea?

Use your reasoning ability and/or ask people you trust to help you respond to the questions below about the major change you are considering. Think carefully about the answers before you take action.

- Do I really want to make this change?
- Is it worth my time and energy?
- How much effort am I willing to put out?
- Does anyone else think this is a good idea?
- Am I having a general urge for change, or am I really dissatisfied with how things are?

will still be important the next day. If she gives herself 24 hours to cool off, she is more likely to handle the situation with tact instead of biting her husband's head off.

### *Make a Small Change*

If you believe the desire for change is driven by hypomania or mania, another strategy is to take the necessary precautions to control symptoms and then ask yourself if there is something small you can change to satisfy the need. Instead of buying a new car, can you wash and wax the one you have? Instead of moving to a new apartment, is there something you can change in your old one that will make it more attractive or better organized? Can you rearrange things to make more space rather than getting a bigger place? If you have the urge to change your hair color, pick a temporary coloring product that will wash out if you change your mind. Rather than getting an extreme haircut, try styling it differently or ask a friend or hair specialist to do it for you. If you want a new look, work with the clothes you have rather than buying new things. If you need accessories, go to a discount or resale store before spending money on purchases you might later regret. If you want to make bigger changes, such as in boyfriends, girlfriends, lovers, or spouses, read Chapter 16 on effective decision making first.

## **Actions That Make Mood Swings Worse**

### *Skipping Medication*

Not taking medication can make things worse. Even skipping a few doses can be harmful because it lowers the amount of the drug in your system, making it ineffective. For some, discontinuing the use of medications for a short time can be a type of personal protest, but the only person it harms is you.

If you're not convinced that you need to stay on medication or if you think your regimen needs to change, talk it over with your doctor before you take any action. Remember that the symptoms of bipolar disorder can alter your thinking and make you feel discouraged about taking medication. Take time to evaluate your thoughts before making any dramatic changes.

### *Staying High*

The enjoyment of highs—positive mood swings—before they get out of control is the reason some people try to extend them. Their hope is to stay hypomanic without letting it become a full episode of mania. Unfortunately, it rarely works out that way. Hypomania can easily evolve into mania for people with bipolar I disorder. Although most would say that in the long run it's not worth the risk, trying to ride out the high is still one of the common things people do that inevitably make matters worse.

Most people are able to think logically when they are hypomanic even when their

symptoms are pushing them to act impulsively. It may be difficult to ignore the urge to stay high, but there is often another part of you that doesn't want to suffer the consequences that mania can bring. To keep yourself from making things worse when your mood is up, you should consider creating a plan for what to do the next time it happens. The plan can be as simple as writing a note reminding yourself about how hypomania affects you and the consequences you may face if you don't do what you can to rein in it. Keep the note in a handy place, like on your bulletin board, smartphone, or computer desktop so you won't have to hunt for it when you need it.

Tommy has had some significant manic episodes, so he thought he would give this exercise a try. Below is his note that he wrote on an index card and taped to his bedroom mirror frame at about eye level. After reading Tommy's example, create a plan of your own in Exercise 6.2 on the facing page.

Follow Tommy's example and create a plan in Exercise 6.2 for what to do if you feel like you are getting high or manic. Make a copy of the plan and put it in a convenient place or give it to someone you trust. Worksheets like this work only if you can find them when you need them and if the ideas are your own. Give it a try!

### *Losing Sleep*

Losing the ability to sleep is a symptom of hypomania and mania, but it is also what seems to make the problem worse. Studies on sleep patterns in mood disorders have shown that loss of sleep can push a person with bipolar disorder into mania. Sleep loss can be caused by travel, thinking about problems at bedtime, working overtime, hearing disturbing noises at night, or getting too involved in fun activities around bedtime. Losing sleep for these reasons

#### **TOMMY'S EXAMPLE** What I Need to Remember about the Risks of Staying High

##### *What to Do If I Want to Stay High*

*by Tommy*

*You've been here before. Don't go there again.*

*Living out the highs is a fantasy with a dark side.*

*It lies to you, seduces you, and tries to convince you that it's safe.*

**BUT IT'S NOT!**

*The highs lead to the hospital and to humiliation. Don't go there.*

*Remember that there are ways to feel good and to have fun without the risks of mania.*

*You've been there before. Don't go there again.*

## EXERCISE 6.2 What I Need to Remember about the Risks of Staying High

Give yourself advice about resisting the urge to stay high.

can quickly turn into insomnia, in which you can't fall asleep. Most sleep researchers suggest going to bed and waking up at about the same time each day. To prevent your symptoms from worsening, follow these simple rules: Avoid all-nighters, schedule travel to ensure a good night's sleep, and work out your worries before you go to bed.

### *Anger*

If you have been through periods of depression in the past, it's easy to get angry with yourself when symptoms return. But getting angry about being depressed only makes you feel worse. Getting depressed about the fact that you're going through another episode of depression compounds your misery, making it harder to bring yourself out of the episode. It's OK to be angry about having bipolar disorder and being forced to go through another round of depression. You have the right to be mad, frustrated, or disappointed. However, it's best to acknowledge your annoyance and then let it go long enough to work at pulling yourself through it. Staying mad only fuels the fire.

## Make a Self-Protection Plan

Keeping yourself from making things worse takes some planning. You have to know what worsens your mood swings and make a commitment to avoid those things the next time you are feeling too high or too low, and you need a reminder of what to avoid and how to avoid it. Use Exercise 6.3 (p. 80) to begin creating your Self-Protection Plan. Start by making a list of the things you know can worsen your depression or mania and note what you will do about

**EXERCISE 6.3 My Self-Protection Plan**

<b>Things that can make my depression worse</b>	<b>What I am going to do about it</b>
<b>Things that can make my mania worse</b>	<b>What I am going to do about it</b>

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them the next time your symptoms worsen. Include any examples described in this chapter that sound like you. If you are not sure what worsens your mood swings, ask a family member, a friend, or your doctor or therapist to help you come up with ideas. Those who know you well can probably tell you about the last time your mood went from bad to worse.

It has been a long time since Raquel has had a full manic episode, but she does get mildly manic or hypomanic from time to time. Below are her ideas for keeping her symptoms from worsening when they appear.

## Considering Suicide

There may be times when thoughts about death or suicide might seem reasonable or feel comforting. Severe depression can darken your thinking to such a degree that you might be able to convince yourself that dying is your only option. These are scary thoughts that often lead to hurtful acts against yourself in an attempt to take your own life. Allowing yourself to

<b>RAQUEL'S EXAMPLE My Self-Protection Plan</b>	
<b>Things that can make my depression worse</b>	<b>What I am going to do about it</b>
Thinking about the past Listing my faults and failures	Cook a meal to distract myself Think about my children
Watching sad movies on TV	Get out of bed, turn off TV, and do something in another room
Getting "advice" from my mom	Screen my calls; call her when I'm feeling better
Drinking wine	Don't buy it when feeling down
<b>Things that can make my mania worse</b>	<b>What I am going to do about it</b>
Shopping in malls, especially during big sales	Avoid them when manic or limit shopping to necessities
Surfing the Internet late at night	Check e-mail in the morning or get online right after dinner
Family gatherings—too many people and too much noise	Don't go or leave early
Staying up all night to watch TV	Read in bed instead of watching TV

spend a lot of time thinking about suicide usually makes your mood worse and puts you at higher risk of acting on your impulses.

Suicidal thoughts can take many forms. In their most severe form, you might hear voices instructing you to kill yourself. These are auditory hallucinations, triggered by the biological changes occurring in your brain when you are depressed. They are not your true thoughts. A milder form of suicidal thoughts might include vague ideas about dying or a desire to just run away or disappear. In the middle range, there might be thoughts that it would be OK with you if your death occurred, although you wouldn't necessarily do anything to bring it about. Some people wish they could fall asleep peacefully and not wake up.

Thoughts about death or suicide are usually the result of feeling hopeless about the future and helpless to make anything change. When you can't think of any other solutions to your problems and can see no reason to hold on, death may begin to seem like an acceptable option. But it's not your only option.

### *Caution!*

- Fantasies about suicide can be very **seductive**. They can trick you into thinking that death will be better than life.
- Fantasies about suicide can give you **false comfort**. They can fool you into believing that death is the reasonable solution to your problems.
- Fantasies about suicide **delude you** into thinking that no one will mind. They allow you to conjure up fake images of everyone being better off without you. They do not allow you to see the grief and misery you will leave behind. They keep you from imagining the guilt that will plague your family and friends for not having saved you.
- Fantasies are not only dangerous for you; they **set a dangerous standard** for others. Children who have a parent who has committed suicide are more likely to commit suicide themselves. Suicide can mean condemning those who love you to a similar fate.

### *What to Do When You Have Thoughts about Suicide*

Do not wait until the last minute to ask for help. If you find that you have active thoughts about killing yourself or less specific ideas that death would be all right with you, tell someone about it. Tell a family member, call your doctor or therapist, or ask a member of the clergy for help. Do not trust yourself to set limits on your suicidal fantasies.

**Get help if you experience any of the following:**

- Thoughts about suicide, including fantasies about how you might do it
- Recurrent thoughts about death in general
- Envy for people who are dead or who are dying
- Giving away your possessions
- Hearing yourself saying good-bye to family members, friends, or pets
- Beginning to prepare people to live without you

- Becoming aware of things in your environment that can help you commit suicide
- Starting to hoard your medication so you will have enough for an overdose
- Viewing warning labels as prescriptions for suicide

The goal of this workbook is to teach you ways to prevent or reduce your symptoms of depression and mania before they get out of control, in this case, before they get to the point that suicide starts to be an attractive idea. If you use the exercises for monitoring your mood changes, are as consistent as you can be with your medication, and learn the methods presented so far for controlling your symptoms, you can stop episodes of depression and mania from getting out of control.

### *Reasons to Live*

To have a chance to change your life for the better, you have to stick around long enough to learn something new. Try doing Exercise 6.4 at the bottom of this page to help yourself fight off thoughts about death and dying. List your reasons to live. Plan ahead for times when you might have doubts that life is worth living. List things you would want to remind yourself of when times are bad. You may download and print additional copies of this exercise from and add them to your workbook as needed.

#### **EXERCISE 6.4** Reasons to Live

Make a list of reasons to continue living. When you begin to have dark thoughts about life, look over the list to remind yourself of these reasons so you can hold on for another day.

Reasons I shouldn't leave:

People to live for:

Things I would miss:

Experiences I have not yet had:

Things that matter to me:

**PAUL'S EXAMPLE** Reasons to Live

## Reasons I shouldn't leave:

*There are things I want to do with my life.  
I'm not a quitter.*

## People to live for:

*My mom, my grandmother, my girlfriend, my best friend, my nieces,  
my brother*

## Things I would miss:

*Hockey games, the Super Bowl, sausage pizza, sex*

## Experiences I have not yet had:

*I want to buy a new car.  
I want to see the Grand Canyon.  
I want to learn to scuba dive.*

## Things that matter to me:

*My family and Angie*

Paul went through a few serious bouts of depression and even tried to kill himself with an overdose of pills. He remembers working his way out of wanting to die by thinking of reasons to stick around. Above is an example of Paul's list of reasons to live. It will give you an idea of how to create your own plan.

***Reasons to Have Hope***

When you feel depressed enough to have suicidal thoughts, you might think there is no other way to solve your problems. You may have temporarily lost confidence in your ability to pull out of the slump you're in. When others try to encourage you or express their confidence in your ability to get better, you might minimize it because it does not fit with your negative view at the time. There may be good reasons to be hopeful about the future, but the tunnel vision that clouds your thinking when you are severely depressed does not let you see them. Because of this, it's best to make your list of reasons to have hope at a time when you are feeling more confident and hopeful. When you're depressed, you can read the list to remind yourself that your outlook can be more positive and that part of you knows there are reasons to be hopeful. In Exercise 6.5 on the facing page, make a list of reasons that you believe there might be hope for your future. You may download and print additional copies of this exercise from [www.guilfordpress.com](#) and add them to your workbook as needed.

**EXERCISE 6.5** Reasons to Have Hope

Make a list of reasons to have hope. The following questions might help.

- What are you currently doing that gives you hope for improvement?
- Is it possible that the problems that bring you down are only temporary?
- Have you made it through difficult times in the past?
- Why do other people believe there is hope for your future?
- When you are not depressed, what kinds of things give you hope?

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**AMANDA'S EXAMPLE** Reasons to Have Hope**My Reasons for Hope:**

*I have a lot of people in my life who love me and help me through difficult times.*

*I have gotten depressed and lost hope before, but I have also gotten it back.*

*I am a strong person. If I can survive childbirth, I can survive this.*

*I always think this way when I'm depressed. It will pass.*

*I have a good doctor and a good therapist who will help me survive.*

*My kids are my reason for hope.*

*I just started on a new medication that the doctor thinks will pull me out of this.*

*I know there is more I can do to help myself.*

Review your list from time to time and add new reasons you can think of to be hopeful. Keep the list where you will be able to find it when you start to doubt that life is worth living.

Clinicians take even your most vague thoughts of suicide seriously, and so should you. They know that a general notion that life may not be worth living or that you would like to go to sleep and never wake up could turn into an active plan to commit suicide. Sometimes clinicians, family members, and friends may seem to overreact when you make comments that suggest that death is on your mind. They overreact because they don't know how close you are to acting on these ideas. While you may take comfort in thoughts about death, they feel a sense of panic and responsibility for your well-being. They don't want to lose you even if in those moments you are not worried about losing them.

### What's Next?

It is instinctual to try to make yourself feel better when you are having symptoms of bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, without realizing it you can sometimes make matters worse rather than better. This chapter covered several situations, activities, and responses that may make your symptoms of depression and mania worse. The goal was to increase your awareness of them so that you can avoid or stop them when you realize what is happening. The same theme carries over to the next chapter, where you will learn how your thought patterns can make your symptoms worse. You will begin to learn skills for controlling thoughts that feed your emotions. The idea is for you to switch your coping strategies from things that may be instinctual, but not helpful, to things that make you feel better.