



with you through the highs & lows

BIPOLAR DISORDER

Information for Employees

Work can be very beneficial for people with bipolar disorder. Apart from being financially rewarding, the feeling of achievement, social interaction, daily structure and routine all boost our mental health. However workplace stress can undermine these benefits. Often when people are looking for work they are put off by the worry that stress will bring on symptoms of their bipolar disorder. Sometimes people looking for work or already in work are not sure what their rights are. There is also the age old question “Should I tell my employer I have bipolar disorder?” This booklet aims to tackle these and other issues about the world of work in the hope that being better informed will help you achieve your work goals.

The legal context

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have a duty to ensure so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of all their employees. Employees must co-operate with and implement their employer’s policies with regard to health and safety.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 place a duty on employers to assess the health and safety risks faced by their employees at work, including stress.

The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against employees who fall within the protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marital or civil partnership status, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. In the case of disability, this involves making reasonable adjustments to ensure that the disabled person is not at a substantial disadvantage to other employees. Long term illness due to or made worse by stress at work may constitute such a disability. In addition, employers must not treat fixed term or part time employees less favourably than permanent or full time employees.

Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful to discriminate at any stage of the work relationship: pre-employment, employment and post-

employment. Everything from the initial job advertisement through to providing references post-employment is covered.

A range of workers are covered by the Equality Act 2010, not just employees but apprentices, zero hour contract workers, self employed consultants, job applicants and more. The Act applies to all employers.

Types of unlawful conduct include: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, discrimination by association, discrimination by perception, combined discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

Am I a disabled person under the Equality Act?

The Act states that a person has a disability if s/he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on her/his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. If you feel you fit this definition you may well be covered by the Act. If you have bipolar disorder it is not automatically a given that you will be covered. It is about the effect of your illness on your everyday life. Most employers, however, would recognise someone with bipolar disorder as someone covered by the Act.

Should I tell my employer that I have bipolar disorder?

In general, employers are not allowed to ask potential employees questions about their health before they are offered a job. Exceptions may apply. So it may be easier to withhold the fact that you have bipolar disorder from your employer or potential employer. However as it is unlawful to discriminate at any stage of the work relationship, there may be no great advantage in withholding this information. Indeed the employer has an obligation to make reasonable changes or adjustments for you if you are at a substantial disadvantage when compared with someone who isn't disabled. This applies again to all stages of the work relationship including recruitment and selection so there could be an advantage in disclosing your diagnosis and how it affects you at an

early stage. Many people decide to disclose this at the point at which a job offer is made.

In the end it is a personal choice as to whether you disclose your diagnosis or not. Be aware that by not disclosing you may be denying yourself valuable assistance. If you do decide to tell your (potential) employer, be factual, professional and not apologetic. Explain how the illness affects you and what they can do to help. You may want to take some literature with you to explain bipolar disorder. Bipolar Scotland can help by providing leaflets and we can offer awareness raising talks in workplaces to help management and/or colleagues understand the condition.

What kind of adjustments can be made?

Adjustments can be made at any stage right from recruitment through to the end of the working relationship. At recruitment, adjustments such as allowing more time for the interview or a quiet place to wait before interview can be made. At the induction stage, perhaps the induction period could be extended or additional support provided in the early stages.

You may find that certain times of the day are more difficult such as the morning due to medication or symptoms. Asking to start later and finish later could be the answer. Breaking up the day with several short breaks rather than one long lunch break could help some who have difficulty concentrating. Or you may need to have more breaks at times.

If you find noise a particular problem, ask to work somewhere quiet or, if you can, use noise cancelling headphones. Seating near a window may be beneficial for natural light and ventilation which can help concentration. There may be many reasons why moving your workstation to another place could be helpful and may be an easy thing for an employer to accommodate. If you take medication such as lithium or anti depressants you could ask your employer to provide a water cooler if they don't already have one. A quiet space for breaks could also be provided.

The 2010 Equality Act has ensured that any reasonable adjustments which are made will not cost the employee anything.

Will work stress make me ill again?

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) definition of stress is "the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.

The most common causes of work stress and mental health problems are increased work intensity, less security, less autonomy, target driven work cultures, bullying and harassment. This applies to everyone, not just people with bipolar disorder. If we can't avoid some of these in our working lives how can we manage our health?

Choosing a supportive employer is a good start but not everyone has the luxury of choice and it can be difficult to tell which companies are more likely to value their employees than others. Reading the company literature or website is a good start. For example do they have any awards such as the Investors in People award which would indicate that they prioritise the wellbeing and development of staff? Do they have a mental health policy? It's not always the large companies that are the best; small companies can be wonderfully flexible and supportive.

If you find yourself facing one or more of the issues which give rise to stress and mental health problems in the workplace what can you do? Monitor the warning signs that this may be having an effect on your health and your work. These are: decreased concentration and memory, repetitive thinking, difficulty in decision making, negative thinking, thoughts of escape, lack of objectivity, nervousness, fear, sadness, frustration, irritability, headaches, digestive disorders, chest pains, weight fluctuation, sleep disturbance, fatigue, working early or late, missing work to avoid stress, being less agreeable with others, taking risks with your health and increased use of substances. In addition monitor your bipolar triggers and early warning signs that symptoms may be

returning or getting worse. If you are not sure what these are read our other booklets on our website and ask us about self management training in your area.

There are steps you can take to manage your bipolar and your work if you notice deterioration due to stress. If you have completed Bipolar Scotland's self management training you will have learned how to act on early warning signs by analysing what works and doesn't work for you based on past experience. If you have done WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Planning) training you will have the action plan to draw on. If you haven't done self management training or WRAP, speak to Bipolar Scotland about taking part.

You can speak to your employer about what has been happening at work and ask them to make the adjustments you need to reduce the stress and manage your symptoms. Guidance on this is available from HSE. If they have not already done so, ask your employers to do a risk assessment for work related stress. It may be that a short period of time off is needed to help you manage symptoms and perhaps adjust to changes in medication but it may also be that with the right support and adjustments you can continue at work with, for example, altered duties or hours. In larger companies, HR and occupational health professionals can also assist.

Here are some suggestions to help you stay well at work:

- Take a walk and get some fresh air at some point in the day such as lunchtime
- If you find yourself being asked to do more than you can cope with, be assertive and say no
- Set realistic goals – perfection is not realistic
- If you start to feel overwhelmed, try to take a break

- Prioritise your workload by writing a list of what needs to be done
- Try not to work long hours or take work home with you
- Identify what will help you at work to stay well and if you feel changes should be made, ask for them
- Look at your company's policies and schemes to see what might be helpful to you

Bipolar Scotland was established in 1994 as a Company Limited by Guarantee and a Scottish Charity. Initially known as Manic Depression Fellowship Scotland the name was changed to Bipolar Fellowship Scotland in 2004 and subsequently in 2010 to Bipolar Scotland.

Bipolar Scotland is “user led” with the Board of Directors comprising people with bipolar disorder and carers. Bipolar Scotland is run from a central office based in Paisley and provides various services to members and others who have been affected by bipolar disorder. To date this has included an information service, production of leaflets/booklets and a quarterly newsletter, On the Level. The organisation supports an ever growing network of self help groups throughout Scotland, and delivers self management training to people who have experienced bipolar disorder. Bipolar Scotland also provides awareness training and talks to external organisations.

Bipolar Scotland is represented on a number of national forums that cover mental health, social care and research into bipolar disorder.

Vision Statement

Bipolar Scotland’s vision statement is to enhance the quality of life of people with bipolar disorder and their carers, including friends and relatives, by offering appropriate support at both individual and group level.



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