

**Module 8**  
*Coping with Psychosocial Stressors  
& Self-Management*

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# Coping with Psychosocial Stressors



Research with people who have bipolar disorder suggests that stressful life events can play a significant role in the development of symptoms, and that the prevention of depressive and manic episodes can be partly achieved by controlling stress. People with bipolar disorder may have problems in a number of different areas, including family, work, health, finances and so on. One important way of controlling stress is to develop skills in identifying and addressing problems that arise on a day-to-day basis.

## *Cues to Action*

Identifying and defining problems requires an awareness that problems exist. There are various internal and external cues that can be helpful for recognising problems as they occur. Internal cues include physical bodily changes, such as muscle tension, headaches, changes in breathing, tightness in the chest. These physical changes can act as signals of stress, and a cue that unresolved problems need attention. Emotional changes (eg, feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, worry) can also act as a cue that problems exist. Other people's behaviour is also a useful indicator that difficulties exist. Family members, friends, and significant others are often good observers, and may be able to identify problems earlier than the person concerned. Unfortunately, it can often be hard to welcome the observations and comments of other people, particularly if they are perceived as criticisms or complaints. Although comments from others may at times be unjustified, they are useful because they indicate that something might be wrong.

## *Identifying and Prioritising Problems*

It is common for people with bipolar disorder to experience significant problems following an episode of mania or depression. For example, financial problems can develop from loss of employment caused by tiredness and low motivation during depression. Likewise, financial extravagance and poor judgement during an episode of mania can lead to financial problems that have to be dealt with afterwards. The feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and being overwhelmed can make it seem impossible to address the difficulties, or even know where to begin.

Having a clear procedure for identifying and addressing problems as they arise can help to minimise the sense of hopelessness and feeling of being overwhelmed. So, once it has been recognised that problems exist, it is useful to work through the following steps:

### **1. Prioritise the Problems**

Often, people are faced with a number of difficulties and it is not clear which needs the most immediate attention. To begin the process of resolving problems, it is necessary to identify a few problems to work on, beginning with those of greatest urgency and importance. A useful way to do this is to make a list of all the issues that have consumed a lot of physical, emotional, and mental energy in recent times (eg, over the past week). The next step is to order the items on

the list according to the amount of energy that they have consumed. Then, prioritise the problems in terms of their importance or urgency. Ideally, the greatest amount of energy should be given to problems that are highest in priority and importance. If this is not happening, it may indicate that a lot of time and energy is being spent doing things that are less important or urgent, and would be better spent on high priority difficulties. The items that are ranked as highest in priority or urgency should be selected as the first difficulties to address.

## **2. Identify Coping Resources**

Coping resources refer to aspects of yourself or the environment that can help in overcoming the difficulties you have identified. External resources include assistance from others, such as family, friends, therapists, and work colleagues. External resources can also include support services/agencies, financial assets, access to transport, and any other aspects of the environment that may help to overcome identified difficulties. Internal coping resources can include:

- Assertiveness
- Intelligence
- Sensitivity
- A sense of humour
- Time
- Organisational ability
- Resourcefulness
- Energy
- Creativity
- Confidence
- Ability to seek out and accept help from others
- Perseverance

## **3. Identify Barriers to Effective Coping**

Several internal and external factors can interfere with successful coping, and it is important to recognise potential barriers to resolving problems, so that they can be minimised as much as possible. External barriers to effective problem solving can include a lack of information about the problem, lack of time, irregular schedules, deadlines, other demands, and insufficient resources (eg, money, work). Internal barriers can include a lack of solutions for solving the problem, symptoms of mania (eg, impaired judgement) or depression (eg, emotional distress, fearfulness), or unhelpful beliefs surrounding the problem and about your ability to solve the problem.

## **4. Address and Overcome Barriers to Effective Coping**

Once you have identified your barriers to coping effectively, it is important that you address them and challenge any unhelpful thoughts or beliefs surrounding your circumstances. Remember that it is alright to ask for help or advice.

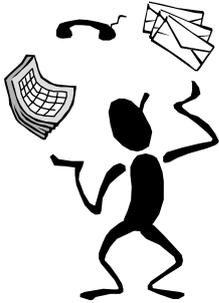
Use the worksheet on the next page to work through this process.

# COPING RESOURCES WORKSHEET

In the first column on the left, write down possible sources of stress, problems in the recent past, or anticipated stressors (remember positive events may be stressful as well). Then, in the 'Coping Resources' column, list the strengths and qualities you have that may help in your coping with problems. Also, identify any external coping resources, such as, friends, family, doctor, etc. Then, identify factors that might interfere with effective coping. These barriers may be internal, eg, beliefs and attitudes, or external, eg, unemployment, heavy workload, tight deadlines, etc. How can you overcome these barriers? Remember to use strategies that we have discussed in the previous modules. Write these down in the last column.

Psychosocial Problems & Stressors	Coping Resources	Barriers to Effective Coping	Strategies for Overcoming Barriers
Current:			
Recent Past:			
Future (Anticipated):			

# PROBLEM SOLVING



Sometimes, it is not enough to just cope with the problems – they need to be solved. Most people engage in problem solving every day. It occurs automatically for many of the small decisions that need to be made on a daily basis. For example when making a decision about whether to get up now or sleep in for an extra 10 minutes, the possible choices and the relative risks and benefits of obeying the alarm clock or sleeping later come automatically to mind. Larger problems are addressed in a similar way. For example “I have tasks that need to be done by the end of the week. How am I going to get them all done on time?” After considering the possible strategies, one is chosen and implemented. If it proves to be ineffective, a different strategy is tried. People who can define problems, consider options, make choices, and implement a plan have all the basic skills required for effective problem solving. Sometimes following a step-by-step procedure for defining problems, generating solutions, and implementing solutions can make the process of problem solving seem less overwhelming.

The following are step-by-step procedures for helping people to solve problems.

## 1. Problem Identification and Definition

- State the problem as clearly as possible (e.g., I don't have enough money to pay the bills)
- Be specific about the behaviour, situation, timing, and circumstances that make it a problem (eg, I need to pay the phone and gas bills, and I don't have enough money to cover both this month)

## 2. Generate Possible Solutions

- List all the possible solutions, don't worry about the quality of the solutions at this stage
- Try to list at least 15 solutions, be creative and forget about the quality of the solution. If you allow yourself to be creative you may come up with some solutions that you would not otherwise have thought about

## 3. Evaluate alternatives

- The next step is to go through and eliminate less desirable or unreasonable solutions
- Order the remaining solutions in order of preference
- Evaluate the remaining solutions in terms of their advantages and disadvantages

#### 4. Decide on a Solution

- Specify who will take action
- Specify how the solution will be implemented
- Specify when the solution will be implemented (e.g., tomorrow morning: phone the gas company and negotiate to pay the gas bill next month)

#### 5. Implement the Solution

- Implement the solution as planned

#### 6. Evaluate the Outcome

- Evaluate how effective the solution was
- Decide whether the existing plan needs to be revised, or whether a new plan is needed to better address the problem
- If so, return to step 2 to select a new solution or revise the existing solution, and repeat the remaining steps

Use the worksheet provided over the next 2 pages to work through this process.



# PROBLEM SOLVING

## 1. Identify and Define Problem Area/Issue

- ✍ try to state the problem as clearly as possible; be objective and specific; describe the problem in terms of what you can observe rather than subjective feelings
- ✍ try to identify what is maintaining the problem rather than just what caused it
- ✍ set realistic and achievable goals for resolving the problem

<i>Problem Definition</i>	<i>Maintaining Factors</i>	<i>Goals for Problem Resolution</i>

## 2. Generate Potential Solutions

- ✍ list all possible solutions without evaluating their quality or feasibility
- ✍ eliminate less desirable or unreasonable solutions only after as many possible solutions have been listed
- ✍ bearing in mind your goals for problem resolution, list the remaining solutions in order of preference

*List of Possible Solutions*

*Preferred Solutions*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Evaluate Alternatives**

- ✍ evaluate top 3 or 4 solutions in terms of their pros and cons

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Potential Solution #1		
Potential Solution #2		
Potential Solution #3		
Potential Solution #4		

**4. Decide on a Solution**

- ✍ decide on one or two solutions
- ✍ specify actions and who will take action
- ✍ specify how and when the solution will be implemented

<i>Action Steps</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>

**5. Implement Solution**

- ☞ implement the solution as planned

**6. Evaluate the Outcome**

- ☞ evaluate the effectiveness of the solution
- ☞ decide whether a revision of the existing plan or a new plan is needed to address the problem

# SELF-MANAGEMENT

Congratulations! You've reached the end of this info-pack! If you have read and worked through all the modules in sequence, well done! If not, we encourage you to go back and work through the bits you might have missed. Most importantly, you should now begin to actually implement some of the things you've planned and to keep practising what you have learned or worked through! This means that all of the useful skills and insights about yourself that you have gained through this information package need to keep being applied. In this way, the concepts and skills you have learned can begin to become more like habits that integrate nicely into your lifestyle.

On the next page is a worksheet entitled "Self-Management Plan" for you to summarise all the important things you have worked through in this information package. We encourage you to complete this worksheet in detail and to keep it close at hand so that you can refer to it when necessary. You might also want to give a copy of it to a family member or a close friend.

As with life, there will be ups and downs. Here are some important things to remember about maintaining the gains you might have made over the course of working through this information package:

**Expect Slip-Ups:** Slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are to be expected. Try not to fall into the trap of believing that you are 'back to square one' as this will only make you feel worse. Use your skills of challenging your thinking to help when this situation occurs. It might be useful to remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days where life's hassles are harder to deal with – its part of being human! Also, you can use setbacks as a way of learning something new about yourself to help avoid similar problems in the future.



**Social Support:** It is wise to find someone with whom you can sit down and have a good talk. This doesn't mean a therapy session where you pour out your heart but rather just a chance to talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are and generally just to ventilate with someone you trust. Social support has been found to be very important in preventing relapse. Often problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Hearing yourself talk through something can help you put it into perspective.



Research has shown that bipolar patients often experience relapse and episode recurrence. However, research has also shown that if you stick to your medication regimen and see your doctor or mental health practitioner regularly, look out for early warning signs and intervene early, you can help protect yourself from becoming extremely unwell.

# Self-Management Plan



What are the signs that tell me I am becoming unwell (depressed or manic) and need to do something about myself?

What can I do to prevent myself from becoming unwell?

What situations are potential problems for me?

What are some things my friends and/or family may say to me if I am becoming unwell?

How can I respond to what they say?

What strategies/techniques have I found most helpful and would continue to practise?

**Thought Management:**

Common unhelpful thoughts when my mood is <i>depressed</i>	What I can say to myself in response (balanced thoughts)
Common unhelpful thoughts when my mood is <i>elevated</i>	What I can say to myself in response (balanced thoughts)

**What are my support options?**

GP/Psychiatrist:

Counsellors/agencies:

Friends:

Family:

Other:

## Module Summary

- Stressful life events can play a significant role in the development of symptoms in bipolar patients
- The prevention of depressive and manic episodes can be partly achieved by controlling stress
- It is important to be aware of signals or cues that problems are occurring and to clearly identify and define them
- Having a clear procedure for identifying and addressing problems as they arise can help to minimise the sense of hopelessness and feeling of being overwhelmed
- The steps to better coping with psychosocial stressors are: prioritise the problems, identify coping resources, identify barriers to effective coping, address and overcome barriers to effective coping
- Sometimes, it is not enough to just cope with the problems – they need to be solved
- Problem solving involves: identifying and defining the problem area or issue, generating potential solutions, evaluating alternatives, deciding on a solution, implementing the solution, and evaluating the outcome
- As ups and downs are a fact of life, expect that you might have slip ups now and then. It will also help greatly for you to organise some social support for yourself through family members or friends
- To better manage your illness, it is important to stick to your medication regimen, see your doctor or mental health practitioner regularly, look out for early warning signs, and intervene early

### A Final word

We hope you have benefited from working through this information package. If you have any concerns or questions about the material you have read, do see your doctor or mental health practitioner. For now, it's goodbye from us at CCI. Take care!