Julie Fast - Health Cards

It helps if you can think of filling in the Health Cards as a discovery process. For example,

you can fill in your basic symptoms quite quickly, but you may find that there are many

symptoms that will show up throughout the years. I filled in my cards the first year and

now, as mentioned above, I still add symptoms from time to time. You can use these

cards for the rest of your life, so it helps if they’re dynamic and can change as you

change.

The Health Cards are divided into three columns: SYMPTOMS, WHAT I CAN DO, and

HOW YOU CAN HELP.

SYMPTOMS What I Can Do How You Can Help

This is a simple system that’s clear and easy to read when you’re sick.

Column One: SYMPTOMS

The Steps:

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1. The first step in filling in the Symptoms column is to transfer all of the

symptoms you highlighted on the sample cards to your own cards. You can

then fill in the rest of the cards with your personal symptoms.

It helps if you break you symptoms into the following categories:

What you say Sleeping

What you do Spending

What you think Exercise level

Physical signs Daily activities

Eating/alcohol/drugs Relations with others

I want to stress that you don’t have to list your symptoms in any particular order,

though I do like to list my thoughts first as they are usually the first sign that I’m ill.

The whole point of the Symptoms column is that it teaches you to notice the first signs

of a mood swing. Knowing what you say and think at the beginning of a mood swing is

the only way you can stop it before it gets out of hand. (It’s equally important that your

friends and family learn this as well.) It makes sense that if you know the symptoms of

each mood swing in minute detail, you can learn what the mood swing feels like when

it first starts. You can then take action to stop the swing before it goes any further.

This is especially effective with mania.

Why be so vigilant?

After years of using the Health Cards, I now know for sure that I always say, think and

do the same things depending on what type of mood swing I’m having. I have literally

memorized what each mood swing sounds and feels like. So instead of constantly

wondering What’s wrong with me today? I can look at my cards and say, “Oh. I’m

psychotic and I need to do something to treat the psychosis.” This works with each of

the separate mood swings. As said before, this helps you learn to manage and

hopefully prevent each mood swing individually instead of trying to deal with all of the

symptoms of bipolar disorder at once.

For example, the Health Card for depression has been especially helpful for me.

Though I have trouble with a variety of mood swings, depression is about 90% of my

problem. Depressive thoughts can be so sneaky and really make me feels that there’s

something truly wrong with my life. Now, I can look at my depression card and remind 18

myself that I always feel that my life is terrible when I’m depressed and I just need to

treat the depression instead of listening to what it’s telling me. The card also reminds

me that anxiety and irritation are often a part of depression, so I need to get out those

cards as well.

2. The next step in the symptoms column is to have a notebook ready to record

your symptoms throughout the day. It helps if you have a small notebook that

you can carry with you at all times. You can write your symptoms and Ideas in

the notebook and then transfer them to the Health Cards. This is a method I

continue to use.

3. Keep a copy of your Health Cards around your living space and fill them in

whenever you remember or experience a symptom. One of my clients kept her

cards on the refrigerator so that they were easy to find. I keep a copy on the

computer and regularly update and print my cards. The cards are always a

work in progress. I added the weird/odd behaviour card almost two years after I

started watching my symptoms, so don’t feel that you have to have a perfect

version before you can use them. (Five years after creating my first Health

Cards I made a travel card to help me manage the illness when I travel.)

4. Give a blank copy of the cards to someone you trust. Ask them to fill in their

observations about your behaviour. This is not about spying or analyzing. This

is about helping. It’s amazing how others can see signs that you’re ill before

you can. It really can make a difference in your stability if you utilize the people

around you. I can’t stress enough how important it is for you to involve your

family, friends and even your coworkers in this process if appropriate. It also

helps if you can forget your embarrassment and shame. Try to focus on getting

well. It’s also important to remember that the people who love you probably

want to help you, but they may not know how. You will have to show them what

to do. You will also find that there are some people who can’t play the role you

want them to play. Learn who can help and turn to them.

You now have an idea of how the Symptoms column works. The next step is to fill in

the second column: What I can do

Column Two: WHAT I CAN DO

Western medicine with its emphasis on medications often takes you out of the healing

picture. You want to put yourself back in. You are your best doctor. You live with

yourself everyday and it’s up to you to see what works. (Once again, let me stress that

the Health Cards are used with what ever medications you’re taking and are not a

substitution for medications – what I mean here is that when you’re stable you are

your best advocate.)

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The key is to fill in the WHAT I CAN DO column when you’re well and then use it when

you’re sick. Filling in this section when you’re in the middle of a mood swing can be

difficult, so go easy on yourself if you’re really sick right now. It may help to use the

What I Can DO ideas from the sample cards until you’re well enough to examine what

really works best for you.

I’ve noticed that when I’m ill I can’t even think of how to help myself. Now, when a

mood swing starts, I can take out the Health Cards and read a long list of what I can

do. I add most of my ideas to the cards after something has worked. This is where

friends and family come in as well. They can hand you the Health Cards when you’re

ill and you can go over the WHAT I CAN DO column together. It’s normal that you’re

not able to help yourself when you start to get ill. The solution is to have this column

ready and waiting so that you can read it at the first signs of a mood swing.

The Steps:

1. Write down your alternative and supplemental treatment options in the What I Can

Do column. From something as simple as aromatherapy to a reminder to take a

certain medication, you can use the WHAT I CAN DO column to write down what

has helped you get better in the past so that you can remember to use the

technique again in the future. This is also where you list what doesn’t help as a

reminder to yourself not to do it again – such as eating chocolate before bed,

partying when you’re manic or hanging around stressful people.

2. Bipolar disorder mood swings are often triggered by outside events. The What I

Can Do section of the Health Cards is where you will remind yourself of what

triggers your mood swings. You can write down the triggers you need to avoid in

order to prevent the mood swing. For example, if time changes always make you

manic, you can write on your mania card, “Remember that time changes cause

problems and prepare ahead.”

3. Use the What I Can Do column to write messages to yourself that you can read

when you’re ill. I’m willing to do almost anything to get well – but sometimes I need

an extra push from my well self to get going. The only way that my well self can

communicate with my ill self is if I write ideas down when I’m well. You can do the

same, so feel free to write messages to your ill self from your well self. You’re

moiré likely to listen if the message comes from you.

You may find that your Symptoms column will be a lot longer than the What I Can Do

column. This is normal. The What I Can Do column will grow as you discover more ways

to help yourself stay stable.

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Column Three: HOW YOU CAN HELP

It really is effective If you can help yourself when you’re ill, but sometimes it’s not

possible. This is why it’s important to teach others how to help you. We are so used to

turning to medications, doctors, therapists, social workers, etc. when we’re ill, but

amazingly enough, our friends and family can be just as helpful if we’re reasonable and

clear in what we ask for. The third column of the Health Cards (How You Can Help)

shows you how to involve your family and friends in your treatment plan. You can also

use the cards with a therapist, social worker and any other health care professional on

your team. Many parents of young children with bipolar disorder involve their child’s

teacher in creating the Health Cards.

Why Your Friends and Family Need a List

When I first created the Health Cards, I got out my copy and gave them to my then

partner Ian. I asked him to write down what he thought I could do to get well then I asked

him to write down what he though he could do to help me. When I read his list in the How

You Can Help column I was just ASTOUNDED!

I didn’t want him to do the things that he thought would help me. In fact, most of the

behaviours he thought were helping were actually making things worse. No wonder we

were both so frustrated when I got sick. For example, he thought that a hug would make

me feel better when I was really ill, but it actually made things more stressful as I was

often psychotic and didn’t want to be touched. As I talked with him more about the

strategies he thought would help me when I was sick, I realized that he wrote down what

he would want in the same situation. Ian has Bipolar I and also has a lot of depression. If

you compare our depression cards, (Ian’s depression card is included in the sample

cards) you’ll see that Ian and I want and need very different kinds of help when we’re ill.

The How You Can Help column of the Health Cards taught me that each person has their

own way of getting better. This is your chance to tell your friends and family what works

and what doesn’t work when you’re ill.

This Isn’t Easy

I have also found that HOW YOU CAN HELP is the most difficult section of the Health

Cards. It’s easy for us to make lists of what we say and do and it’s not that hard to think of

how we can help ourselves, but how do we teach others to help us? There are some

solutions.

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The Steps:

1. The first step is to remember what people have done in the past that really worked

or didn’t work and write those things down first. For example, it doesn’t help me at

all if someone asks me how I am when I’m depressed. I will either lie or cry. But if

they say, “I can see that you’re down Julie, we are going to take a walk. Com on!

Let’s go!” that really gets trough to me. I need tough action when I’m down so I

have to make this very clear on the What You Can Do column. You will have to

decide what works for you and write it down so that your friends and family know

what to do.

2. Remember, when you’re ill, you might want something for yourself that’s not in

your best interest – you may write, “It’s best if you just leave me alone when I’m

depressed” which is not really a solution to the problem. That is why it’s important

to fill out the cards and especially the How You Can Help section when you’re well.

Your goal is to get better and stop the mood swings – not push people away.

Another important point to remember is that people WILL FORGET to look at the

cards. They are not sick like you are. They really don’t know what you’re going

through. You have to give a set of the cards to your friends and family and remind

them to use them – often over and over again. You may have to remind them for

years – as I have had to do with my family. But I promise that once they learn to

use the system, their help is invaluable.

3. Include the contact information for your doctor and any other important health care

professional in this column. You can put the instructions here that will tell others

how and when you need professional help. For example, you could write, “If you

hear me say that I don’t want to live and you are truly concerned for my safety, you

can call my doctor and tell her that I’m suicidal and that I need her help.” This will

take a lot of the fear from the situation and will help your friends and family take

action instead of felling so helpless.

For most people using the Health Cards for the first time, this How You Can Help column

I something completely new. Few of us have really thought of exactly what others can do

to help us with each specific mood swing. Instead, we simply hope that people can just

tell we’re sick in general and do something about it. The reality is that most people – even

when they love you a lot – are not intuitive at all about what you need. Mental illness can

be very confusion. Your moods may change so much that people have no idea how to

help you. This is why the Health Cards are so helpful for friends and family. When they

read the cards they can pinpoint what mood swing is starting, go to that specific card and

then read exactly what to do on the How You Can Help column. Be patient with your

friends and family. It took my mother and brother a long time to get comfortable with this

system. This is a learning process, but people can learn how to help you especially if you

give them concrete instructions.

You’ve now started to fill in the three columns of the Health Cards. The following section

will give you further tips and ideas on using the cards.

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When the Cards are Ready

Though the cards are never completely finished, you will come to a point where there is a

lot of helpful information on the cards. You’re then ready to give the cards to your friends

and family. You can laminate them, put them on the fridge, put them in a clear plastic

folder or have them bound in a copy shop. I suggest a computer copy as it’s easier to

read. You will then have to remind your friends and family to use the cards. They need to

memorize your symptoms so that they don’t get caught up in your first symptoms and get

angry or frustrated with you instead of helping. You may know that you’re getting sick and

yet can’t ask for help – what you can do is simply say. “Please get out the cards and look

at them.” This will let your friends and family know that you need help.

You may also forget to use the cards when you’re sick – I often do. The secret is to have

someone give them to you when they notice you’re sick or either have the cards in such a

conspicuous place that you can’t miss them. This is why it’s so helpful to have a stable

and healthy person read and keep your cards so that they can get them out when they

see you need help.

After completing your cards, you’re ready to take charge of bipolar disorder. The Health

Cards are my constant companions and have saved many relationships and have

certainly saved my life. I know they can do the same for you. Here are some final tips for

filling out and using the cards.

TIPS:

 The Health Cards don’t read across in a line. In other words, you don’t write

something in the Symptoms column and then go to the What I Can Do column and

write something next to it. The columns are completely independent, which means

you will learn many ways to help yourself instead of having one response to one

problem.

 Don’t forget to use the cards to write messages to yourself. Use the language that

you know will get through to you. You can read this message to yourself when

you’re not able to make rational decisions. This may get through to you and help

you stop destructive behaviour while the help of others will not. I often do this to

stop mania. An example on your mania card would be, “You’re showing the first

signs of being manic. I know you don’t want to go back to the hospital. Call your

doctor now and get help.”

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 You may have different categories from the sample cards. I’ve found that a Health

Card can be created for any problem that comes up because of bipolar disorder.

I’ve recently started a Health Card for finding balance. This is a real challenge for

me and the card helps me stay focused on what I need to do.

 Friends and family can learn the signs of a mood swing and may be able to see

what you can’t see. They can hand you the cards and point out your behaviour.

Since you’re the one who filled in the cards, you won’t feel they are trying to control

your behaviour – you know they’re only doing what you asked them to do.

 The Health Cards show you the entire spectrum of a mood swing. For example, if

you’re manic the cards help you chart the first manic thought that may eventually

lead to buying hundreds of dollars of what you don’t need. By seeing these signs

from the beginning, you will be able to stop yourself from going where you’ve

already gone before. Another example would be that the psychosis card can

remind you that from the first moments you hear a voice when you’re in a stressful

environment such as in the classroom, (maybe they will hear a voice that says, No

one likes me) there’s a chance that it can turn into a paranoid episode if you don’t

treat the bipolar disorder immediately.

 Another benefit of the cards is that they teach you how episodes can lead to a

chain reaction. I know that if I have a visual hallucination, it means that I’m

stressed and over stimulated and need to look at my cards to see what mood

swing is starting. I know that when I’m feeling depressed, I might be irritated and

anxious as well, so I have to look at those cards along with the depression card.

 Once you’ve used the cards for a while and have most of your symptoms charted (I

think you’ll be very surprised to see how regular your symptoms can be), you will

have a treatment plan waiting for you the next time you notice one little sign that

something is wrong. This is why it’s important to have the cards available at all

times.

 Ultimately you will want to use the cards as a preventative tool – which means you

will learn to do the WHAT I CAN DO column all of the time.

 Learning what triggers your mood swings is the single most effective tool you have

in preventing the mood swings from taking over you life. The Health Cards will help

you see the pattern to your illness which means you can learn what triggers

specific symptoms and then stop the triggers in order to stop the mood swings.

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A NOTE TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

People who are in a bipolar disorder mood swing are very good at convincing others that

it’s not a swing at all. “I’m NOT manic. I’m just well for once and want to get on with my

life. Do you want me to stay down forever? Why would you want to stop me when I finally

feel good?” Or “I’m NOT depressed. I’m just stressed. You would be stressed too if you

were in my position. Why can’t you just leave me alone?” These comments give such

mixed messages – which is why it’s important for friends and family to learn the language

of bipolar disorder in order to know when bipolar disorder is talking and not the person

they love. (It’s very important that these comments are written in the symptom column of

each mood swing as they are often the first sign that a family member will have that their

loved one is in a mood swing.)

The Health Cards can really help you as a friend or family member because you can get

out the cards and say, “Well, I’m looking at the cards you asked me to look at and it

seems that you have a lot of the symptoms of mania. In fact, you wrote down that you

always say you aren’t manic when you’re manic. Can we go over these cards together?”

Hopefully this will trigger something in the person with bipolar disorder and they will look

at the cards. It’s hard to defy cold, written fact. If the person still won’t listen, write what

they are saying and doing in the SYMPTOMS column so they can read it when they’re

well. You next step will be to got straight to the HOW YOU CAN HELP section and get

moving yourself. You can read the concrete things you can do to help – you don’t have to

feel helpless any more. Make sure that the HOW YOU CAN HELP section always has the

name and number of a professional that you can call if the person is too ill to get help on

their own.