



**The**  
**HEALTH**  
**CARDS**  
**system**  
**for Bipolar Disorder**

**A Revolutionary Approach to the  
Treatment of Bipolar Disorder**

**by**  
**JULIE FAST**



**DISCLAIMER**

In no way should bipolarhappens.com's information and products including the Health Cards System and the book *Bipolar Happens!* be considered as offering medical advice.

Julie Fast, the creator of the Health Cards and *Bipolar Happens!* is not a doctor, therapist or health care professional. She is a teacher and writer who has bipolar disorder. She also lived with someone who has bipolar disorder for ten years. It's suggested that readers consult other sources as well as obtain direct consultation with a physician when making decisions about their health care. The information offered on the Bipolar Happens web page is therefore not intended to replace the medical advice afforded by a complete medical history and physical exam performed by a physician. The Health Cards treatment program and the book *Bipolar Happens!* are for people who have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder by a licensed doctor - hopefully a psychiatrist. Neither the Health Cards nor *Bipolar Happens!* are meant to be a substitute for traditional western medical treatments- they are a tool to use along with medications.

Julie Fast is not liable for any outcome or damages resulting from information obtained on the Bipolar Happens website in its content from either an indirect or direct form.

**MEDICATIONS AND PSYCHIATRIC CARE:**

The Health Cards treatment plan and the book *Bipolar Happens!* were created as tools for comprehensive healing which means they're used in tandem with other treatments both western and eastern. Let me make this very clear:

I'm not telling you to stop your medications.

The Health Cards can help you deal with medication side effects and make you more able to ask for smaller doses or different medications- but that's not the same thing as stopping your medications. I believe that all people with bipolar disorder need to have contact with a psychiatrist or general doctor in order to thoroughly discuss medication options.

The Health Cards are a tool that you can use with your health care team. So, once again, please don't stop your medications because you think any products, tips or opinions from [www.bipolarhappens.com](http://www.bipolarhappens.com) or its products can take their place. They can't. Medications are something for you to discuss with your doctor and family members- not a decision to be made from something off the internet or in a book. You're usually the best judge of what care you need and the best way to get that care- but as we all know, bipolar disorder can take away that judgment in a second. So stay on your medications to prevent an episode. Learn to work around them. Learn to take care of yourself by using the Health Cards, but don't stop your medications because of this system. Whew! I guess I have made my point.

## **ANOTHER DISCLAIMER**

All correspondence concerning the Health Cards and *Bipolar Happens!* is confidential. I will never sell or use your name or email address in any way without your permission.

Sorry about having to write all this legal stuff, but one has to be careful. Please take care of yourself. Bipolar disorder is serious. I take it seriously- very seriously, so please read and remember the disclaimers regarding the information on bipolarhappens.com. Your life is worth so much. Take care of it, act responsibly and ask for help when you need it. You *can* get better.

## **SOME ADVICE FROM SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN THERE**

If you're suicidal or starting a manic episode, do something for yourself right this minute. Call your doctor and say, "I have an emergency and I need help." Take care of yourself - think of your future. Bipolar disorder is not your life- it's an illness and you can get better.

Please know that it takes time to learn this system. If you're sick right now, just do what you can and remind yourself that you don't have a deadline or a test at the end. This is about you and your health. It's not meant to be stressful or overwhelming. Give yourself time to learn the system, ask for help and constantly remind yourself that it takes time to learn something new.

## **Bipolar Disorder is Predictable**

Before you get started with the *How to Use the Health Cards* section, I would like to talk about my philosophy regarding the treatment of bipolar disorder and also give you some background information on the illness.

I believe that bipolar disorder is a predictable illness. People with the illness may have it to different degrees, but the general symptoms are the same for everyone. People tend to get depressed, manic, angry, unfocused, anxious, psychotic or overwhelmed in the same way. The triggers may be different for each person, but the symptoms are the same. This is often hard for people with bipolar disorder and their friends and family members to believe because bipolar disorder behavior seems so personal.

Consequently, people with bipolar disorder are almost always blamed for their symptoms. Bipolar disorder attacks the brain - the center of a person's thoughts and actions. It doesn't affect a leg or blood cells or the pancreas. All of those areas can be seen as separate from the 'self' - but the brain is different. When the brain is sick, it's easy for other people to see the person with bipolar disorder as having emotional and psychological "problems." The equivalent would be telling people with diabetes that they're bad people because they just can't regulate that darn insulin! Our society rarely reacts this harshly to accepted physical illnesses such as arthritis, cancer, broken bones, MS, pneumonia or any of the more familiar physical illnesses we encounter in our lives. But it almost always does with mental illnesses.

People with bipolar disorder are usually misunderstood by society. People often tell us that we should just learn some time management, anger management, self discipline and common sense. They say, YOU JUST NEED TO GET SOME SELF ESTEEM! So we read another book on being your own best friend and yet the problems still persist.

Then there are the young children who are now being diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Everyone can see that this child just "needs more discipline." Isn't that obvious to everyone? It's also obvious to teachers and other parents that something must not be right at home or why else would ten year old Jimmy go after his mother with a knife or why would little six year old Sarah tell her mother that she wants to die? So many children, like adults with mood swings are seen as the problem. They are often misdiagnosed with ADHD or other behavior problems. They are sent to juvenile detention and often end up in jail.

Before this gets too depressing, I want to say that there are solutions to all of these misconceptions. I'm hoping that society can start to understand that if all people with bipolar disorder (children and adults) have the same symptoms, it just simply isn't possible that it's a personal issue. People with bipolar disorder and their friends and family members need to educate themselves on the specific symptoms of the illness so that they can learn to separate bipolar disorder from the person who happens to have the illness. The Health Cards were designed to help people with this process.

## A Different View

I look at bipolar disorder differently now that I've been living with the illness for over 20 years. I often ask people: "What if bipolar disorder is actually the reason you're sad, happy, angry, unorganized, mean, lonely, unsuccessful at work, unsuccessful at friendship and love, anxious and just downright weird? What if it's an illness that makes you *look* like a person with emotional and psychological problems, but in reality, inside, you're actually stable, strong and filled with self esteem? What if the illness just won't let the real you get on with your life?" Would this change the way you look at yourself?

I don't know about you, but for over 15 years I was blamed almost daily for having this illness - and sadly, once I was diagnosed I still didn't understand that most of the problems I thought I had in life were actually symptoms of bipolar disorder. I blamed myself for my shortcomings just as much as the people in my life blamed me for not being as successful as I should have been considering all of my talents. *You're never satisfied*, I would tell myself. *You can't keep your friends happy. You can't work. You can't write a book. You can't sing. You can't travel like a normal person. You can't even keep your moods stable!* Even today, it astonishes me that when a person is diagnosed they are not given a handbook of the typical symptoms of this illness so that they can know that what they go through is normal. It sure would help us stop being so hard on ourselves for the behaviors due to bipolar disorder.

## **There is Some Good News**

The good news is that there is a way to treat bipolar disorder effectively and you really can learn to manage this illness comprehensively and get your life back. If you can accept that you simply have a physical illness that has emotional and psychological symptoms, you can take the power away from bipolar disorder. There's nothing wrong with you just because you have bipolar disorder. What's wrong is that you may not know how to manage the illness so that it doesn't take over your life every time you get sick. You *can* learn what problems are real and what problems are caused by bipolar disorder. The Health Cards will help you see that your illness is predictable, even though it feels so random. It's treatable, even though it feels out of control. You really can learn who you are and learn to act from that core instead of letting bipolar disorder act for you.

(If you're the parent of a child with bipolar disorder, the first step you can take is to accept that your child simply has an illness that looks like a personality problem. You may be scared that your child will not get better. You may be scared and think that you've done something wrong. Many parents of children with this illness feel this way. I know it was very hard on my mother before I was diagnosed. It will help you greatly to see that symptoms that seem so random and out of control in your child are actually the symptoms many of us with this illness live with daily. )



## A Note on Mood Swings

You will notice as you start to use the Health Cards that I believe that bipolar disorder is much more than mania and depression. My theory is that the illness is not really *bipolar* disorder but is instead more of a *multi*polar disorder. In other words, I believe that there are many mood swings within the bipolar disorder diagnosis. (My brother pointed out that something can not really be multi polar, but I am sure you get the idea!) Bipolar disorder does not just go up and down- it shoots out in all different directions - which is why it's such a difficult illness to treat.

Traditional thinking states that bipolar disorder consists of manic and depressive mood swings. This means that all of the other problems associated with the illness from psychosis and anxiety to anger and focus problems are considered symptoms of either mania or depression or, as is often the case, are seen as a different illness - such as ADHD.

There are many problems with looking at bipolar disorder in this way. People with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder tend to focus on the mania and depression and may not get help for psychosis, anger, anxiety or attention/focus problems - just to name a few of the separate issues most people with bipolar disorder face. These are often the areas where people get into trouble because they can't control their temper - they can't concentrate well enough to finish school or they're so anxious they're seen as not only having bipolar disorder, but an anxiety disorder as well. In other words, they get help for the mania and depression, but the other problems

are not given the attention they need. Medications are often seen as a blanket treatment for all of these issues. Many health care professionals believe that by taking care of the mania and depression the other "symptoms" will be treated as well. I haven't found this to be the case. I feel that major bipolar disorder problems need to be treated as separate mood swings with separate treatment plans. In my mind, this is the only way to treat the illness successfully and comprehensively. I've also found that treating each mood swing separately reduces the need for supplemental medications that help people with mild psychosis, anxiety or ADHD symptoms as these separate mood swings are often very treatable without full time medications. It makes a lot more sense to treat each problem separately instead of trying to treat the illness as a whole. It's simply too overwhelming for most people with this illness to take care of everything at once. And it's often impossible for friends and family members to know how to help as they are usually unsure of what is happening when their loved one is sick.

## **The Correct Diagnosis**

Another important step towards a healthy life is for you to know and understand your diagnosis. Do you have bipolar I (one) or II (two)? If you're a family member or friend of someone with bipolar disorder, do you know their exact diagnosis? The following explanation of the different bipolar disorder diagnoses is an excerpt from my upcoming book *Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder: Understanding and Helping Your Partner*. This book is available in all major bookstores and amazon.com. My co-author John Preston (Psy.D) provided the technical material for this section of the book. Please note that the audience for this book is the partner

of someone with bipolar disorder, but the information is applicable to anyone who has or comes in contact with the illness.

\*\*\*\*\* excerpt start \*\*\*\*\*

## Bipolar I and Bipolar II

The main difference between Bipolar I and Bipolar II is mania. People with Bipolar I have *full blown manic episodes* while people with Bipolar II have *hypomania*.

Mania and hypomania can feel positive or negative. Mania can cause feelings of euphoria (a wonderful, exciting, fantastic feeling of well being) or it can cause agitation, irritation and anger. It may be hard to understand the difference between hypomania and mania. The most common sign of Bipolar II hypomania is a decreased need for sleep, but a lack of fatigue during the day. There is also increased energy, creativity and activity. Things really do get done easily and effectively at first. One of the reasons it's difficult to understand hypomania when you see it is that people experiencing hypomania can function relatively normally and it often runs its course without the person getting help. In contrast, people with full blown mania (Bipolar I) can't function normally. They behave in ways that are profoundly out of control, socially unacceptable and often dangerous. Full blown mania may start out looking like hypomania, but eventually escalates to a point of being too serious to ignore. People with very severe Bipolar I mania may also experience psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations. This severe form of

mania requires psychiatric medication, treatment and hospitalization. It's important that you know if your partner has Bipolar I or Bipolar II. Ask your partner and talk with their doctor if you're not sure of their diagnosis.

## Rapid Cycling Bipolar Disorder

Rapid cycling is not a mood swing. Instead, it's a type of bipolar disorder that occurs in both Bipolar I and Bipolar II. It describes people who experience mood swings more often than people with traditional bipolar disorder. The majority of rapid cycling involves major mood swings that occur four or more times per year (on average, somewhere around six episodes a year.) The newly termed "Ultra Rapid Cyclers" applies to those who have mood swings maybe 12-20 times a year. Some people are "Ultra Ultra Rapid Cyclers" and have mood swings more often. For Ultra Rapid Cyclers the mood swings go back and forth, up and down and just don't stop. Ultra Rapid Cyclers may feel so sad they want to die and within hours that feeling slips away and they're ready to go out to dinner and have some fun. This kind of rollercoaster existence is very hard on the body and on relationships. Those with Rapid Cycling Bipolar I are generally much more severely impaired owing to the intensity of manic episodes. Around 20% of people with bipolar disorder (Bipolar I and II) are rapid cyclers. There is also increasing evidence that substance abuse may be a key factor in causing or aggravating rapid cycling.

*When I'm rapid cycling I feel like a leaf blown in the wind. I'll go way down and cry what feels like a waterfall of tears and then I suddenly feel the mood leave my body and be replaced by a feeling that things will be alright. I*

*couldn't cry if I wanted to. I can then get up and do things like a normal person, but soon the depression is back and I'm on the bed crying again.*

Does your partner's diagnosis include rapid cycling?

\*\*\*\*\* excerpt end \*\*\*\*\*

## **My Diagnosis**

I have Ultra Ultra Rapid Cycling Bipolar II. I've had three major hypomanic episodes that lasted a few months each time and caused a lot of havoc in my life. My first was at 17 on a trip to Europe and the second was at age 23 on a trip to Japan. The third was at age 28 while I was living in Japan. (Yes, I see the travel pattern!) I've had hundreds of mini hypomanic episodes that have cost thousands of dollars and caused terrific problems in my life. The good news is that since starting to treat myself comprehensively in 1999, I've only had one serious hypomanic episode. This involved a \$500 Lazy boy chair, the bags of cough drops I write about in *Bipolar Happens!* hundreds of dollars in candles, a trip to Las Vegas, playing black jack in local casinos, a very expensive French class and an even more expensive coaching class for entrepreneurs. Total cost in three weeks? \$5000. I now use the Health Cards to prevent this serious hypomania. I have to admit I miss the highs of a really good hypomania, but have learned that the high never really lasts. The episodes always cause confusion, upset and destruction if they're not stopped. This hypomania is about 10% of my bipolar disorder.

My main problems are with depression and psychosis. I've been depressed and psychotic off and on since age 19. I'm now 40. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 31. I've had major depressive and suicidal episodes after each big event in my life. These episodes were usually triggered by a move, the end of a relationship or as in the case of my most serious episode, the death of a friend.

I rapid cycle within the depression and psychosis which is probably why I'm still alive. This means that I would always cycle out of the mood swing for at least a few hours even though I was very sick. I have passive suicidal thoughts that come and go depending on what triggers the thoughts. I see myself dead much more often than I think of actually killing myself. (It's important that you know what kind of suicidal thoughts you have. Are they active or passive?) Psychosis is still a large problem for me. Although I understand and control this psychosis with the Health Cards it's still a big drain on my energy. My type of mild, chronic psychosis is usually triggered by outside events and I've learned to avoid my triggers and if I can't do this, I always have a plan ready in case I get psychotic.

Before I started the Health Cards I would cycle more than four or five times a day when I was under stress. It's no wonder I couldn't work or have stable relationships. I know for sure that many of the medications I tried actually caused more rapid cycling, so it's very important for you to know your correct diagnosis and if you're rapid cycling, make sure you and your doctor find medications that help instead of exacerbating the problem. Antidepressants are notorious for increasing rapid cycling.

## Triggers

The more work I do on the comprehensive treatment of bipolar disorder, the more I'm convinced that the illness is almost always triggered by outside events. This is bad news and good news. The bad news is that those of us with bipolar disorder are hyper sensitive to stress and life in general. The good news is that if we can discover, modify and eliminate our triggers, we have a much better chance of leading a stable and joyful life.

Learning what triggers your bipolar disorder mood swings is the single most effective tool you have (outside of medications) for preventing bipolar disorder from taking over your life. The Health Cards were designed to help you find your specific bipolar disorder triggers. As you read over the following list of potential triggers, put a check next to each one you find familiar.

### **Here are some of the common triggers of bipolar disorder:**

Arguments	Social events
Travel/ time change	Shopping centers
Work related stress	Driving in traffic
Caffeine	Poor diet high in refined foods
Drugs - including medications	Alcohol
Change in general	Lack of exercise

Unstable family situation	Television/media
Poor relationship with partner	Hanging out with crazy-making people
Trouble with work/coworkers	Aggressive behavior of others
Lack of balance in one's life	Over stimulated life
Poor sleep habits	Over scheduling/ over committing
Lack of a schedule	Abusive relationships
Serious world events/war	Contact with an alcoholic/drug addict
Death/illness of a loved one	Lack of supportive friends and family
Loss of a job	School/work obligations
Lack of structure	Everyday obligations
Too many obligations	World events
Being constantly on the move	ETC....

It often seems that life in general is a trigger for bipolar disorder and for many people it is. I know that when I'm already sick, I don't deal with my life very well. This is always a sign that I need to examine the triggers in my life and do something about them. Sometimes this is a hard decision, especially if the trigger is work related. It has taken me a while to accept that there are just some things I simply can't do if I want to be stable. This may be a challenge for you as well. The above trigger list can help you start to examine the triggers of your own illness. What's happening in your life right now that is triggering bipolar disorder? If you



can answer that question and then do something about the trigger, you can see some amazing results in your stability.

## Why Use the Health Cards?

The whole point of the Health Cards is to show you that this illness has nothing to do with who you are as a person. When you see your symptoms charted under each mood swing and you start to see that you act the same way every single time a certain mood swing starts, you can begin to see that maybe you're just fine after all and it's the illness and its triggers that needs to change, not you.

Here are some facts about people with bipolar disorder that may help you as you fill out your Health Cards.

People with bipolar disorder often.....

Have trouble working

Have trouble with relationships

Have money problems

Have suicidal thoughts

Hear voices/hallucinate

Can't deal with stress

Spend money when they're manic

Have trouble concentrating

Have affairs when they're manic

Have trouble with alcohol, food, drugs  
and caffeine

Have trouble in school

Move to escape "problems"

Get overwhelmed easy

Feel bored with life

Do weird things

Can't feel love when they're sick

Change their minds constantly

Can't make decisions.

Lose sexual feelings when depressed

Frustrate their loved ones

Treat mood swings with substances  
and behaviors that only make the  
swings worse

*Ask, What's the point? Or Is this all  
there is?*

The list can go on and on. You're not alone when you have a mood swing. There's someone in another part of the world having the exact same symptoms you're having. If you're like me, you have all of the above symptoms when you're ill and *few* of them when you're well. This is proof that once you learn to treat bipolar disorder effectively, you can take care of so many of the "problems" that have seemed impossible to fix in the past.

It really helps to remember as you read over the next section on how to use the Health Cards that there is nothing wrong with you psychologically. You simply have a physical brain illness that needs a strong treatment plan. When you fill out the Health Cards and use them as part of a holistic treatment plan that includes medications, therapy, exercise, good food choices and a desire to get this illness under control, you really can have a happy and stable life. It's not easy and it will take a lot of work for the rest of your life, but when you look at the alternatives, it sounds like a good plan.

## **How the Health Cards Work**

### **The Health Cards:**

1. Teach you to break your bipolar disorder into specific mood swings.
2. Help you chart the symptoms of each mood swing so that you know what mood swing you need to treat. This will let you see that bipolar disorder is very predictable and follows a set pattern depending on what mood swing you're experiencing. This will also help friends and family know what mood swing you're experiencing.
3. Help you discover and write down what you can do to help yourself so that you can use this information when you feel too sick to help yourself. You will then explore all of the traditional and alternative treatments you can use to stop and ultimately prevent these mood swings.
4. Help you discover and write down what the people in your life can do to help you get well and stay stable. They can use this information as soon as they see the signs of a mood swing.
5. Finally, the Health Cards will help you discover the triggers of each mood swing so that you can prevent the symptoms of bipolar disorder instead of spending all of your time treating them.

(For parents who have young children with bipolar disorder, you will do most of the work at first and will soon be able to involve your child in creating a specific treatment plan that works for your child's specific symptoms. Even very young children can learn how to use the three columns in the Health Cards. They can learn to recognize the signs that they're feeling sick and can then ask you to get out the Health Cards so that you can work together to keep the mood swing from going too far. They can also learn at a young age what triggers their symptoms so that they can learn to modify and eventually avoid these triggers.)

### **A Final Note**

Bipolar disorder is actually very good at letting you know you're sick. All of the signs are there at an early stage. Your goal is to learn these first signs so that you can prevent the mood swing from going any further. You can then use the Health Cards to help you treat the symptoms and ask for help. Finally, it's up to you look at your relationships, work, surroundings, medications and any other area in life you think might have triggered these symptoms so that you can learn what you need to do to modify and stop the triggers. This is the secret to treating bipolar disorder effectively. When you learn this system and stick to it, you really can find stability and lead a happy and more productive life.

## HOW TO USE THE HEALTH CARDS

The following section explains how the Health Cards System works. It helps if you read through the directions once before making your own cards.

- ❖ **Step One:** Print out the Sample Health Cards. If you're working with friends and family members, make a copy of the Sample Health Cards for them as well.

Look over the sample cards and notice the different categories of mood swings. You may have all of these mood swings, you may have less or you may have more depending on your particular symptoms.

- ❖ **Step Two:** Read and highlight your similar symptoms on the Sample Health Cards

In this step, you will look over the sample Health Cards and highlight any symptoms you have in common with the cards. If you're working with friends and family members, they will do the same and highlight any symptoms they have noticed in you when you're sick. Remember, the wording for these symptoms may be different, but the ideas behind them are the same. It helps if you highlight in one color and then have a family member use a different color. This will help you see the symptoms that others notice that you may not be aware of.

This step will help you clarify what mood swings you experience and what cards you will make on your own. Some people have different symptoms for the categories while others are very similar to the sample cards. The purpose of this exercise is for you to start thinking of what mood swings you deal with and what symptoms you will put under each mood swing once you start your cards.

### **How to Involve Your Friends and Family**

It really helps if you can go over the sample cards with people you trust. They often notice symptoms that you can't see. The idea is for them to get a feel for the Health Cards and how they work. Give them a copy of the sample cards and ask them to highlight the symptoms they've noticed in you. It's interesting to see how others view your behavior. This can provide a lot of insight as it's often hard to see your own symptoms when you're sick. A note of caution: It's important that you only ask for help from the people who want to help and from those people you feel are understanding and compassionate. There is an essay on this topic at the end of this book.

#### **❖ Step Three: Break your bipolar disorder into specific mood swings**

After you've looked over the sample cards and highlighted your common symptoms, you're ready to discover your own specific mood swings. Sit down with a piece of paper and break your bipolar disorder into categories. As stated before, the point of the Health Cards is to show you that there's a lot more to bipolar disorder than

depression and mania. As you can see by the sample Health Cards, bipolar disorder mood swings can also include psychosis, paranoia, irritation/anger, attention/focus problems, anxiety, over-stimulated/ overwhelmed, mixed episode, weird/odd behavior, normal and more. You can also have cards that are not about mood swings. For example, if you have been hospitalized often, you will want a hospital card that shows your symptoms before you need hospitalization. Though hospitalization is not a specific mood swing, what leads to going to the hospital is usually a predictable set of symptoms. If you have obsessive/ compulsive symptoms you will want a card to help you see what leads to this behavior. This is all about you and your mood swings and symptoms. What are your categories? When you know your preliminary mood swing categories you will be ready to start your own cards.

(Parents of young children with bipolar disorder may have different cards from those listed. For example, you may want to have an oppositional card. In my experience, children who are diagnosed with the illness seem to deal with a lot of attention/focus and opposition/violence problems. Your cards need to reflect the specific problems you have with your child.)

### **The Importance of the Normal Card**

Many people with bipolar disorder have no idea what it feels like to feel normal. If you've been sick a long time, it could be that illness has become a normal way of life for you. It's very important to break this pattern and get back to a more normal

life so that you can find stability and happiness. It's true that your 'normal' may be very different from people who don't have the illness, but you still have to know what a healthy normal feels like for you. I use the normal Health Card to remind myself what I'm like when I'm *not* sick. I've also discovered a way to remind myself that the illness is tricky and I have to be very vigilant if I want to recognize a sneaky mood swing. I do this by using something I call the normal letter. I read this letter when I'm sick to remind myself that bipolar disorder is just an illness that needs treatment and there's nothing wrong with my life in general. Here is my example:

### **The Normal Letter:**

Dear Julie,

This is your normal letter. If you're reading this you must be feeling sick. I know it's hard for you to know when you're sick, so I thought I would write this letter when I'm feeling normal so that you can remember what normal feels like- this way you can have something to compare with your current feelings.

I woke up this morning and got out of bed and didn't overanalyze my dreams. I didn't feel worried or guilty and I didn't dread the day or wonder *What's the point?* I just got on with my day. I didn't feel disorganized, disjointed or hot when I had to get the bags with the book manuscript and my computer ready. I just did it. I went to the library to work on the book. I didn't think too much about my life while working. I didn't overanalyze my emails or think I don't have any friends. I felt positive about the book. I ate when I was hungry and talked with friends at the library without worrying I was bothering them by talking too much. I didn't think that they were upset with me when we finished talking. I just went back to my computer and started writing. I didn't worry about being single. I didn't feel I had to plan every night of the week so that I wouldn't be alone for a minute. I was able



to be alone. I watched a movie by myself for a speech I'm giving and took notes for the speech without thinking I was alone and would never find love again. My pulse rate was normal throughout the day. I didn't feel that I looked or smelled funny. I got along well with my mom. I wasn't irritated at anyone. I felt normal towards David (my nephew). I got work done. I wasn't overly worried about my weight, my future, Ivan, phone calls from guys or money.

I got projects done and didn't have to stop in the middle and talk myself back into working. I didn't feel overwhelmed by my clutter and didn't trip on things or get angry. I need to do something about the clutter, but that was my only thought. I was not excessively creative. I didn't make skirts, jewelry, organize my room and sketch my ideas for a clothing line. I didn't over plan my future with big lists of what I'm going to do. I didn't think of changing my hair or my city. I didn't need Ativan and didn't obsessively check my email.

Feeling normal is pretty rare these days, isn't it? But I have to remember what it feels like so I can focus on getting well when I'm sick instead of believing (as bipolar disorder wants me to believe) that something is wrong with me or my life. I'm working so hard to learn to separate myself from the bad days. The bad days are not about me, **they are an illness**.

Julie, if you're reading this letter, you're sick. It's NOT you. It has nothing to do with you. It's only about bipolar disorder and you know you need to treat bipolar disorder first. Read your Health Cards. Reread *Bipolar Happens!* Remind yourself that it's an illness. Treat the illness so that you can get well and won't need this letter.

When you're well you are:

Focused	Not startled easily
Calm	Not easily irritated
Organized	Non obsessive
Productive	Able to enjoy being single
Normal	Not so hard on yourself
Able to relax	Kind
Ok with being alone	Present oriented

Ok with the past

and just plain happy to be alive.

If you're not like this right now, then treat bipolar first so you can be this way tomorrow. You can do it. I believe in you.

Love,  
Julie

This is a letter you can write to yourself. You can print it out, laminate it and have it close by at all times. You can add it to your Health Cards so that friends and family can read the letter. It really is shocking for me to read this letter when I'm sick. It reminds me that bipolar disorder is so darn TRICKY. It really does make me think my life is terrible, when I was absolutely fine the day before. This is why it's so important to know what normal feels like. You have to have something to compare to bipolar disorder so that you can know what is real and what is the illness.



## **You're Ready**

You have now completed the first steps in creating your Health Cards. The next section will teach you how to fill in your own cards. Before you get started - look over the sample cards once again and notice what is listed under each column. This will help you get a feel for how the cards work. It helps if you have the cards on your computer so that you can type and then print out your cards. You can create your own Health Cards in Microsoft Word by using the columns tab under the

format menu on the tool bar. You can then use the border key on your tool bar to create a border around each column. It also helps to have printed versions of the cards so that you can write on them anytime you have an idea. I updated my cards quite often in the first year. I would then transfer the ideas to the computer files and print out the new copy to give to my friends and family. I now update my cards after each serious episode. There is always something new to add to the cards, though my cards have stayed basically the same since I first created them in 1999.

### **Filling in the 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:

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 your 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 feel that there's something truly wrong with my life. Now, I can look at my depression card and remind 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 behavior 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 behavior. 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.)

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 more 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.

### **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 Ivan. I asked him to write down any other symptoms that I might have missed. I also asked him to write down what he thought I could do to get well- then I asked him to write down what he thought *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 behaviors 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. Ivan has Bipolar I and also has a lot of depression. If you compare our depression cards, (Ivan's depression card is included in the sample cards) you'll see that Ivan 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.

### 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. Come on! Let's go!"* that really gets through 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 feeling so helpless.

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

### **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 behavior 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."
- ❖ 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 behavior. Since you're the one who filled in the cards, you won't feel they are trying to control your behavior- 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 moment 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 your 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.

## 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. Your next step will be to go 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 health care professional that you can call if the person is too ill to get help on their own.

## The Bipolar Conversation

How can friends and family members possibly say the right thing when someone says, "I'm a failure and I want to die." What if a person in a psychotic episode says to the person they love, "I can tell you're going back to your old partner and you don't love me any more." What if a child says something terrible to a parent or a person at work suddenly tells a boss that the job sucks and they're leaving to travel the world? Most people naturally react to this scary bipolar disorder language by listening to what is said and then taking it seriously. They *react* to the actual words and start what I call the Bipolar Conversation.

This conversation happens when the person you love is sick and bipolar disorder is doing the talking, but you react to what they're saying as though everything is normal. This leads to a lot of problems. The conversations are circular- the ill person keeps saying what bipolar disorder is making them say and you keep reacting to what they are saying and usually try to get them to see that they're making no sense.

For example, a typical response to hearing that a person feels like a failure and wants to die is, "You're not a failure! You've done so much with your life! Why are you so unhappy? Why do you want to die? So many people love you!" Talking this way doesn't work for a few reasons. First, when the person you love is sick, bipolar disorder is doing all of the talking. You will recognize this very clearly once you have a long list of the symptoms for each mood swing. The language of bipolar

disorder is always the same and reacting to it simply doesn't work. The second problem is that reacting to what the ill person says doesn't address the real problem: bipolar disorder. If you can see that bipolar disorder is talking, it makes sense that a normal conversation simply isn't possible. The bipolar disorder must be treated first if you want to have a normal conversation.

It helps if you can learn what bipolar disorder language sounds like so that you can avoid these bipolar conversations. There is a detailed chapter on the Bipolar Conversation in *Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder: Helping and Understanding Your Partner*, but for now, try to change to way to talk to your loved one when they are sick. You really can learn a new way to respond to bipolar language. When you learn this new way of responding, you can write down your ideas in the How You Can Help column. Here are some tips on how to respond to bipolar disorder and avoid the Bipolar Conversation.

What Works: For example, when a person is depressed there are certain ways you can respond that cut through the depression and get to the real problem: they need help with bipolar disorder. For example, using the above example of hearing someone say they're a failure and want to die, you can respond, "I hear you and I know you're depressed. You have bipolar disorder and this is normal. I've seen you like this before. Let's get out the Health Cards and see what we need to do to stop those thoughts and get you some help." This addresses the real issue and doesn't lead to a Bipolar Conversation. You really can make a big difference in the life of someone with bipolar disorder if you can learn and remember to respond to the

bipolar disorder mood swing with what helps treat the illness instead of reacting to what the person is actually saying.

If you're the one with bipolar disorder, you know how hard it is on your friends, family, coworkers and health care professionals when you're sick. You may feel frustrated with the way your family responds to you. One way to deal with this is to get very specific with what you need from them so that they don't feel so helpless. You can teach them about the bipolar conversation and what they can do when they feel one is starting. It may seem odd to tell someone how to talk to you when you are ill, but it is an effective tool that can save a lot of relationships.

### **Young Children and the Health Cards**

Many people have asked me questions regarding young children and the Health Cards. As you may know, my bipolar disorder started when I was a teenager. I didn't have a lot of violent/oppositional symptoms that many young children diagnosed with bipolar disorder experience, nor did I have suicidal thoughts until age 19 - because of this my symptoms on the sample cards are very adult oriented. This doesn't mean that the cards don't work for children - it just means that parents have to create cards that are a bit different from the sample cards. If you're a parent of a child with bipolar disorder, think of the exact problems you have with your child and create a card for each problem. Suggested cards include Violence, Oppositional/Defiant behavior, Sleep, School, Medications, Teasing,

Interacting with Others, ADHD symptoms, etc. Since the mood swings in children often overlap, it's a good idea to get really specific with your cards.

For example, Ynid, a mother of six year old Gabe wrote me that they have a card for teasing. The following is an example of what the card can look like.

### Teasing Health Card

#### SYMPTOMS

Gets really angry when teased  
Acts out physically  
Gets violent  
Even gentle teasing is too much  
Tenses shoulders and arms  
Furrows brows  
Lowers his eyes  
Balls his fists  
"Leave me alone."

#### WHAT I CAN DO

Ask others to stop  
Say, "I really have a problem with teasing. Please don't tease me."  
Say, "I don't like teasing."  
Visualize a stop sign in my head  
Close my eyes and breathe deeply  
Unclench fists and open and close my fingers to release energy  
I can always walk away and tell an adult  
I can take space away from everyone until I feel safer. Then I can go back and be with people  
I can use a timer to time my "taking space"

I can use a stress ball

I can teach myself to be aware of what is a bipolar disorder reaction and what is the real me

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

Know that my reaction is part of bipolar disorder - my brain doesn't respond to teasing like the brains of other kids

Try to help me and understand me instead of getting mad at me

Show me the Health Cards and remind me what I can do. If you see me ball my fists and tense my shoulders, you can say, "What do the Health Cards tell you to do Gabe?"

Praise me a lot - especially when I recognize and do something to stop my violent behavior

Focus on what I do well

As you can see, Ynid and Gabe have worked hard on his anger management when he gets teased. Gabe may only be six years old, but he was completely able to understand the idea of the Health Cards. The Health Cards can help so much because a parent, teacher or social worker can go to the cards as soon as they see a child tense their shoulders or ball their fists and know what to do to stop the anger from going too far. They can say, "I can see you're really upset. Let's look at the Health Cards." Teachers don't have enough time to learn exactly what each child does when they're under stress and need help. The Health Cards immediately show them what to look for. This helps the child focus on what they can do instead of focusing on how badly they want to hit something. I have this same intense anger myself sometimes and I use the cards in the same way. Another amazing thing happens when an adult uses the cards with a child. Often suggestions from an adult can make a child even more upset, but when the suggestions come from a card

that the child helped create, the results can be amazing. I do understand that opposition/defiant behavior is often way too serious to treat with this system. This happens when the behavior has gone too far. But I do feel that the cards can help stop the behavior from escalating to the point where the cards will no longer help. As a parent, your goal is to work with your child to learn the FIRST signs that a mood swing is starting and teach your child, your family and your child's teachers and friends to recognize the first signs and offer help to stop the behavior before it gets out of hand.

### **The Health Cards and Teenagers**

I suggest that teenagers make cards that reflect some of the changes they're going through naturally so that they can truly learn the difference between bipolar disorder behavior and normal teenage behavior. For example, a card on self esteem, body image, dating or eating can be very helpful.

### **Using the Health Cards to Prevent Hospital Visits**

Many people with bipolar disorder make frequent visits to the hospital. I've found that creating a hospital Health Card can help prevent hospital visits. Here is an example of how you can create a hospital Health Card:

#### **SYMPTOMS**

Under symptoms, write what leads to a hospital visit. What starts the chain reaction that makes you end up in the hospital? Is it a major trigger such as the

break up of a relationship? Is it work related? What thoughts do you have at the beginning? Do you go into the hospital because of a specific mood swing? Ask others what they notice about you before you go into the hospital. What are the easy to see signs that you're starting an episode that needs immediate attention? Think of the last time you were in the hospital. What were the first symptoms? Write all of these symptoms down under the symptoms column. Make sure to include your thoughts, sayings and actions. You have to become familiar with your particular pattern.

## WHAT I CAN DO

You can then decide what you need to do to stop the symptoms and ultimately prevent going to the hospital again. This goes in the What I Can Do Section. This almost always involves getting your medications stabilized, calling your doctor immediately, getting help and support from the right people, changing diet, sleep and exercise patterns, using supplements, changing your own behaviors and really examining, modifying and eliminating the triggers. It can also mean writing a letter to yourself that you can give to friends and family members if they're scared for you and think you might be heading for a hospital visit. This letter can be like the normal letter in that it speaks to the well you and tells you to look at the Health Cards and get immediate help. There is a letter like this for mania in *Bipolar Happens!*



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

What did the people around you do before, during and after your last hospital stay? Write this down in the How You Can Help column and make it clear what worked and what didn't work. Tell people exactly what they need to look for and what they need to do to help you stay out of the hospital. For example, the card could say, *If you see that I'm isolating myself, listening to sad music, crying and not following my normal routine, say this to me: It looks like you're sick again. Are you suicidal? Can you tell me what you're feeling? I'm going to call your doctor and we will get through this together.* Remind them that you may push them away, but they have to call your doctor and get you some immediate help. You will thank them later. List all of the preventative things your friends and family members can do to help you stay out of the hospital such as asking you how you feel and really listening, asking about your medications and making sure you are taking them, helping you get different medications if you just can't take the ones you have and doing things with you to help you feel better and change your brain chemistry. For mania, they have to keep a copy of your Mania Health Card with them and really learn the symptoms. The mania treatment window is so small and hospital visits can happen very quickly if the mania is not caught at the beginning. It's important that your friends and family members don't ignore the small signs of mania because you're probably feeling too good to do anything about them and can't even see that the mania is starting.

If you can get all of this information on your Hospital Health Card, memorize it and then ask others to memorize the information as well, you can hopefully prevent another trip to the hospital. You will know the first signs that a serious swing is starting and can get immediate help. This is how I stay out of the hospital myself.

### **The Health Cards are Adaptable**

As you can see, the Health Cards can adapt to any problem you have because of bipolar disorder. If it seems overwhelming right now to actually do the cards, don't worry. It's normal to feel this way. The fact that you've read this far is amazing in itself, so praise yourself for reading this section and then take a break before you tackle creating your own cards. I often say things like, "It's okay Julie. You can do it. Just take a break and go easy on yourself." This helps remind me that bipolar disorder is an illness that causes me to get overwhelmed and it's okay for me to take time to get things done.

### **There is Hope!**

If you're the parent, partner, friend or health care professional of someone with bipolar disorder, it really helps if you can remind yourself that this illness can cause people to think they don't need help, push people away, continue destructive behavior, get violent, do stupid things, make decisions that everyone except the person with bipolar disorder can see are detrimental and even try taking their own life because the illness is so painful. This means that you may get very frustrated

as you try to help someone with bipolar disorder. Hopefully the Health Cards will give you the tools you can use to work together to prevent mood swings which can then prevent the behaviors that cause so much frustration. If you're the person with bipolar disorder, remind yourself that it's an illness and once you learn how to recognize the pattern of your mood swings, you really can get control of your moods and get your life back. It is possible.



## HEALTH CARDS GLOSSARY

There are a few items on the Sample Health Cards that might be new for you. The following is a glossary to explain the terms along with information on how to find the items I use to stay well. Please note that these definitions are not official definitions - they are not from a medical doctor. They are for your information so that you can go and do your own research to find out more about your alternatives.

**Acupuncture-** I've used acupuncture over the years for a variety of ailments. Many people also feel that acupuncture can balance the energy of the body- which can then help you balance your moods.

**Aromatherapy-** This therapy involves using scents to affect the moods. I regularly use lavender essential oil when I can't sleep or feel anxious and have found that smelling peppermint essential oil when I'm depressed can really help jump start my brain.

**Ativan** (Lorazepam) - this is one medicine that I can tolerate in small amounts. It's an anti anxiety medication that has really saved me in many situations. I can only take it sparingly as it gives me pretty bad memory loss- but in certain situations such as crowded baseball stadiums it's a life (and relationship) saver.

**B Vitamins** - The B vitamins, especially folic acid and vitamin B6, help support the clearing of the stress hormones by the liver. I try to take B vitamins every day and definitely notice a difference in my moods and energy level when I forget to take them.

**Bipolar friendly diet**- I know that when I limit wheat, sugar and dairy and follow a diet with some macrobiotic elements, I get better. (See below for an explanation about macrobiotics) I have less mood swings and my relationships improve greatly. I have trouble following this diet, but I keep trying. You have to find the bipolar friendly diet that works for you. I don't have a specific diet that will change your symptoms, but I can say that learning about the macrobiotic and the whole foods way of life can make a huge difference in the way you see the world.

Some people have told me that diet doesn't have a strong effect on their moods, but that their physical health improved immensely when they limited wheat, sugar and dairy as they lost a lot of the weight caused by medications. I think this has to do with body chemistry. I have found that those of us who are highly susceptible to medication side effects respond strongly to changes in diet. The problem is that

for many people, including myself, maintaining this diet is simply too hard. What matters is that you keep trying for a balance and work on avoiding the foods and drinks that you know exacerbate your symptoms. An excellent book to help you find the diet that is right for you is *Food and Healing* by Annemarie Colbin. Another alternative nutrition book is *Foods That Fight Pain* by Neal D. Barnard. The best explanation I have seen for how foods affect the brain is *Potatoes Not Prozac* by Kathleen DesMaisons. I also like the book *The Kitchen Shrink* by Natalie Savona.

Western medicine places little emphasis on diet for the treatment of bipolar disorder. Because of this, you may not be aware of the way food affects your mood. It's important that you examine what foods trigger your bipolar disorder symptoms. This is where a naturopathic doctor who has studied the effects of diet on mental illness can help you make the changes you need to get better. For many of us, this isn't easy. Eating disorders can be a part of bipolar disorder, so take your time and keep trying. Never give up hope and one day you will eat better and see the differences. For your reference, here is the diet that I have found really helps create stability.

As said before, I really do well if I don't eat any wheat, sugar or dairy. I have less mood swings, perfect skin and no weight problems, but it's very hard for me to stick to this plan. I now try to limit what I can. I have learned to eat spelt, quinoa, brown rice, natural sweeteners and soy. This is hard and I'm not always successful, but it's my life goal to keep trying. I also eat the Green Diet when I'm really down. This is described below. I try to

follow the concept of yin and yang when I eat. (There is more explanation of yin and yang foods under the macrobiotic section of the glossary.) If I'm manic I avoid yin (expansive) foods and try to stick to the yang (contractive) part of the food groups. For example, it's not a good idea to have stimulating foods such as a big salad with some bread and a lot of chocolate (which is what I want) when I'm up. Instead, I need to eat calming foods such as brown rice, miso soup, root vegetables and greens such as collards. No, it's not as fun, but a reality if I want to stay well. I highly recommend that you learn about whole foods cooking which can really change the way you feel. I can't stress enough how important it is for you to look for nutritional information outside of the western system. Find a good naturopath, read alternative nutrition books and learn what works best for you. Food does make a difference.

**Bipolar Hangover-** I've noticed that after a particularly bad mood swing, especially one with psychotic symptoms, that even though I stop the swing, I'm often tired and just plain worn out physically the next day. I call this the bipolar hangover. It usually only lasts a day and is a sign that the swing is over. I try to go easy on myself and let my body recuperate.

**Birth control pills-** The Pill and any other medications that you would never think of checking can make you depressed. I stopped the Pill in 1999 and the final low grade depression that I just couldn't shake went away. So talk with your doctor to see if there are any depression side effects to any of the non bipolar disorder

medications you currently take. Once again, I'm not suggesting you change your medications on your own. (See disclaimer) I'm saying you should talk with your doctor and work on this issue together. (It's also important to know that antidepressants can cause irritation, anger and mania.)

**Breathing-** I simply can't stress enough the role that breathing has played in my recovery. It helps with anxiety, panic attacks, psychosis, mania and anything else that just feels too stressful to tolerate. I have found that singing is great for relaxation as you have to breathe well in order to sing well. Andrew Weil covers breathing in his book *8 Weeks to Optimum Health*. If you're interested in yoga, look for a class that includes yoga breathing (pranayama).

**Brown rice:** Brown rice is one of the best foods you can eat to balance your system. I make sure I eat plenty of brown rice when I'm slightly manic or anxious. It's also good for anger and irritation.

**Buddhism-** Buddhism teaches acceptance. I'm not saying that you have to become a Buddhist to treat your bipolar disorder, but I have found that many of the teachings in Buddhism relate directly to our struggle with getting better. Two good books to start with are *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron and *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche.

**Chamomile tea-** A calming herb tea that's a great sleep aid and anxiety reducer. You can also look for homeopathic chamomile remedies in the health section of a natural foods store. One brand is Calms by Hyland's.

**Chiropractor-** If your body isn't in balance it's difficult for your brain to be in balance. I believe that chiropractors who are trained in body work and alternative medicine can really help treat bipolar disorder. Interview a few chiropractors and see if they can offer you any help.

**Cognitive therapy-** Cognitive therapy is based on the idea that if you change your thoughts you can change your moods. Cognitive therapy has played a huge role in my recovery. The definitive book on the therapy is *Feeling Good : The New Mood Therapy* by David D. Burns. I really can't recommend this book highly enough.

**Dissociation-** Defined under Depersonalization Disorder in the DSMIV (the diagnostic manual used to diagnose bipolar disorder), dissociation (formerly called Multiple Personality Disorder is described as *persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (e.g., feeling like one is in a dream)*. Dissociation is serious and emotionally painful. I don't have this disorder, but my psychotic episodes have included this symptom. It's the feeling that things are not real. As though you're watching yourself. The last time I had this, I felt as though my body and soul were roasting over an open fire and that I was in a cave filled with bats. This is no fun and I don't plan to have this symptom ever again.



**DSMIV-** (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders version 4) The big red diagnostic manual that psychiatrists use to diagnose mental illnesses. I highly recommend that you go to a book store and take a look at this book. It really does a good job of listing the symptoms of bipolar disorder.

**Green Diet-** I created this diet by accident. When you're depressed it's as though your entire system shuts down. When I'm down I simply don't function and most of all my brain doesn't function. I used what I knew about energizing foods and created the green diet. When I'm down I eat the following for energy: Brussels sprouts, Cabbage, Kale, Collards, Chard. Dark Lettuce, Avocados- (I later read about the connection of folic acid), Asparagus, Garlic, Curry spices and other hot spices (but not if I'm anxious). I don't use green peppers, beans, iceberg lettuce or many really light colored greens- the dark heavy greens seems to boost the energy the best. I make a soup called calcium soup which can be flavored any way you like and I drink it for a kick start in the morning. To make this soup, chop and cook collards, chard, spinach and kale until tender. Add any seasonings you would like (garlic is especially good) and enough stock to create a soup. When the soup is cool, blend until smooth. Heat and drink this throughout the day when you're depressed.

**Hallucinations-** I think that many of us are uneducated about hallucinations. I know that I had them for ten years without knowing what they were. I thought that

everyone heard voices telling them they should leave a book store because they had no right to be there. There is an essay on hallucinations in *Bipolar Happens*.

**Herbal teas-** Herbal teas can really help you calm down when you're anxious, can give you a pick up when you're down and can help cleanse the system when you're on medications. I use chamomile when I'm hypomanic and peppermint when I'm down.

**Immune System-** I don't think we are conscious enough of how this illness and the medications we take affect our physical bodies. We need to protect our immune systems now before we get a physical illness to go along with our mental illness. To learn more about your immune system, try the book *The Immune System Cure* by Lorna R. Vanderhaeghe and Patrick J. D. Bouic.

**Internal clock-** I know that every time I travel I will have problems. I have learned to minimize them, but there will be mood swings. Our body has natural rhythms called circadian rhythms that regulate the functions of the body and determine how well we sleep. I believe that people with bipolar disorder have more sensitive circadian rhythms than others. I even have trouble when the time changes for daylight savings time. When I have to travel to different time zones, I prepare weeks in advance. I don't want to ruin my travels with mood swings. Time change symptoms can include mania or depression as well as irritation, feeling overwhelmed, fear or any other non typical vacation responses. You may want to look into the time change and do what you can to modify the change before you travel. Also, I really feel that the natural treatment of bipolar disorder must

include knowledge of how light affects your moods. Light helps you set your internal clock. If you're taking medications that make you sleep through the morning or afternoon, you may be missing important light. Think about this issue and do what you can to set your body clock in the morning.

**Ivan-** Ivan was my partner for ten years. He has bipolar disorder I. He was very ill in 1994 and was in the hospital for three months. He is now stable and doing well. He lives in France and uses the Health Cards to stay well. Ivan's depression Health Card is included in this packet.

**Kava Kava-** A calming Polynesian herb used in pill form or tincture. This is readily available at most natural food stores. Kava kava is a natural treatment for anxiety and mild hypomania. I use this to help me sleep and to help me calm down. Kava kava is a life saver for those of us with anxiety. Anti anxiety medications such as Ativan work, but their side effects are often impossible to live with. I get memory loss when I take too much Ativan- but I can use kava kava with few side effects. Kava kava has been used as a social and ceremonial beverage in the South Pacific for hundreds of years. It's a relaxing and very effective as a calming agent and sleep aid. I use it when my other tools such as breathing or removing myself from the stressful situations don't work. Please note the following information:

- You can read recent research on kava kava at [www.drweil.com](http://www.drweil.com) regarding some cases of liver toxicity in Germany and Switzerland. I personally feel that these cases relate to the excessive use of the herb and don't feel it

will affect my occasional use of kava kava, but it's important that you're informed so that you can make your own decision. I find it so interesting that indigenous cultures can use an herb safely for hundreds of years and then when the west gets a hold of it, it becomes toxic and dangerous.

We have to learn to be responsible. Occasional use of kava kava is not the same as daily use in high doses. Inform yourself and then use your common sense when you use herbs.

**Light box-** Light is one of the most important tools you can use to get better. I believe in a walk every morning to set your internal clock. If you live in an area without much light, such as Seattle, Washington or Scandinavia you may be able to use a light box for the same effect. Warning: People with rapid cycling should talk with a psychiatrist before using a light box. They can cause mood swings.

**Linux-** You may notice that Ivan's depression card mentions Linux. Ivan is a computer programmer and Linux is a much loved operating system used by geek programmers. Ivan's depression almost always includes worries about computers and his computer work.

**Macrobiotic diet-** The macrobiotic diet is based on the concept of the yin (expansive) and yang (contractive) energy in foods. It's the only diet whose concepts I have found effective for controlling bipolar mood swings. But let me qualify this. I don't follow a traditional macrobiotic diet, nor do I recommend that

you follow one. What I take from the diet is that different foods have different energies. Salad foods which are more yin are naturally more stimulating than brown rice or root vegetables which are more yang and more calming. It makes sense that if you're trying to calm yourself down you would eat calming (contractive) foods. I can't think of anything more expansive than mania nor anything more contractive than depression. So it makes sense that we can use food to treat these conditions. Read what you can about this diet and use what you think will help. What I'm asking you to do is explore the way food affects your mood and the best explanation I have found for these effects comes from the macrobiotic philosophy. There are plenty of books on the macrobiotic life style, but if you want a concise explanation I recommend the book *Food and Healing* by Annemarie Colbin. I also recommend the site [www.macrobiotics.org](http://www.macrobiotics.org) for more specific information on macrobiotics.

**Media addiction** - Andrew Weil (*8 Weeks to Optimum Health*) and Julia Cameron (*The Artist's Way*) both suggest a media fast in their books. I suggest getting rid of your TV completely until you're free from depression and mood swings. Yes, I know this is hard and for many people it seems impossible, but I really can't think of anything worse for depression than the news and most of the programs on TV these days. Just tell yourself that you can have a TV again once you're well. Not having a TV will change your life completely. It frees up your time and lets you make your own decisions about the world. Ivan once said, "You know, the world is not a bad place when you live in it. It's only a bad place when you see it on TV." He's right. So think about your TV and all the time you waste watching it when you're down. What could you do instead? I was television free for almost three years. It

truly made a difference in my healing. I now have a television, but am very aware of how it affects my moods.

**Meditation-** I wasn't able to meditate until I got better. My brain wouldn't let me sit still for any period of time. I had so much brain chatter. So, the first step is to deal with the brain chatter. Both the Health Cards and my book *Bipolar Happens!* have tips for doing this- then you're ready to learn to meditate. Meditation is especially helpful for anxiety.

**Mood stabilizers-** These are the main drugs used to treat bipolar disorder. Lithium, Depakote, Tegretol and others are commonly used to treat mood swings. I'm resistant to these medications due to side effects which is why I had to create the Health Cards. I truly wish I could tolerate medications as they reduce the work a person has to do to stay well. If you're having serious side effects such as excessive weight gain or memory loss from your mood stabilizer, it's your right and obligation to ask your doctor for alternatives. I believe that quality of life is just as important as stability and we need to educate our doctors that we need both.

**Naturopath-** Naturopathic medicine is a branch of medicine committed to holistic treatment. It's in contrast to western (allopathic medicine) which tends to stress pills and surgery. A naturopath is so much more than a doctor. They work to bring the life in balance- they don't only focus on the illness itself. Here is how Andrew Weil defines Naturopathic medicine: "The Naturopathic philosophy is based on the concept of the healing power of nature. The earliest doctors and healers worked

with herbs, foods, water, fasting, and bodywork. Certification follows study at a four-year, graduate-level, naturopathic medical school. This must include the basic sciences studied by M.D.'s. Students are also taught holistic and nontoxic approaches to therapy with a strong emphasis on optimizing wellness and disease prevention. In addition to following a standard medical curriculum, the naturopathic physician is required to complete four years of training in clinical nutrition, acupuncture, homeopathic medicine, botanical medicine, psychology, and counseling. Naturopathic physicians take professional board exams in order to be licensed by a state or jurisdiction as primary care general practice physicians (identified as an ND or NMD) " Make sure you interview your naturopath and ask if they have experience with mental illness. If they don't, they will gladly refer you to someone who does.

**Neuroleptics** (anti psychotics) - Thorazine, Haldol, Risperidal, Trilifon and Abilify are anti psychotics. I can't take these medications due to side effects, but they definitely worked in reducing my psychotic symptoms. I really believe that by working on reducing and preventing psychotic symptoms by using the Health Cards, you can greatly reduce your need for these medications. *Bipolar Happens!* offers tools for reducing psychosis as well. Once again, please read my disclaimer. I'm not saying stop your medications.

**Rescue Remedy**- Rescue Remedy is a Bach Flower (homeopathic) remedy sold in health food stores and whole foods stores. This is a liquid remedy you put under your tongue to rescue you from anxiety attacks, excessive stress, irritation, and

any other trouble you may not be able to handle. After the last earthquake in Seattle, Washington my naturopath gave this remedy to her receptionist who was having a panic attack. You can read about Rescue Remedy at [www.bachcentre.com](http://www.bachcentre.com). The site says, "In an emergency Rescue Remedy can be taken neat from the bottle, four drops at a time, and as frequently as required. Otherwise put four drops in a glass of water and take frequent sips until the emotions have calmed." I keep it in my bag. It works. This remedy can be used for all ages including babies.

**Rheumatoid Arthritis-** RA is an immune deficiency illness. I have it and believe I got it because the medications I took knocked out my immune system. Please take care of your immune system if you have bipolar disorder. You really don't want a physical illness.

**Serzone-** An anti depressant that I used to be able to tolerate in small doses. Unfortunately it now causes so much rapid cycling I can no longer use it. My body has changed over the years and I'm not able to take antidepressants at all due to the acceleration in mood swings.

**Soy Products-** We all know how important soy products are for our health- especially women's health. I also feel they are important in the treatment of bipolar disorder because they are balanced and calming. Though I do eat meat, I try to have soy every day.



**Sympathy Sob-** I always know I have pushed myself too far when I have the sympathy sob. It usually happens when I'm driving and I see something sad such as a homeless person or a stray animal, though when I'm really stressed I can sob over something as silly as a store with no customers.

**Yoga-** Yoga is a wonderful addition to any health care plan as long as you choose the yoga that is right for you. Many people rush into yoga, hurt themselves and never try it again. To keep this from happening, choose a form that fits your body type and personality. The current trend in power yoga, which includes **Ashtanga** and **Bikrim** is extremely vigorous yoga and requires a body that is really in shape. You will feel the endorphin rush in this yoga, which is great for depression, but the risk of injury is high. **Iyengar** yoga is the most popular yoga in the world today. It's a yoga based on holding postures for a certain amount of time. It's fine if you're in shape and have good knees and a good back. Look for a gentle Iyengar class to start with and if it hurts your knees, just bend them until you feel less stress. **Kripalu** yoga incorporates the mind and body into the yoga practice. It often concentrates on breathing and philosophy. I personally like **Viniyoga**, which is a movement yoga that stresses the importance of breath in the practice. There is less chance of injury in Viniyoga as it's a bent knee yoga. It has been invaluable in my healing process. I also highly recommend any type of **Pranayama** yoga practice. Pranayama is a breathing practice that will increase your breathing capacity and teach you some amazing ways to deal with anxiety, mania, depression and life in general.

Choosing the correct yoga is like choosing the right doctor. You must have a teacher you respect and who respects your limitations. To me, yoga is associated with a loving feeling. It should never feel like competition. This is the last thing you need if you're not feeling well. Try out a few classes until you find the one that makes you feel comfortable and supported. You will know it when you find it. My mother, who has been studying yoga for forty years said, "Yoga is not only about the style of yoga, it's about the teacher. A good teacher will never let you hurt yourself." So when you look for a class, look for the teacher who can become an important part of your health care team.

❧ glossary end ❧

## HOW TO CHOOSE PEOPLE WHO CAN HELP

Taking charge of your own health by using the Health Cards is the first step of your comprehensive healing treatment plan. The next step is choosing the people who can help you with your journey. I want to illustrate the importance of the choices you make by telling you a story.

Life before the Health Cards:

When I was very ill and suicidal I turned to a friend of mine for help. Jenny and I had known each other since high school and I naturally thought she

would be the best person to help me get through the truly hard times. I was very ill at the time with mood swings and terrible side effects from my medications. I would call her, hoping that she would ask me to come over. I thought about her all of the time and wondered why she always seemed distant when I called. I didn't see the signs that she was totally overwhelmed with my behavior and kept trying to see her. It wasn't that she didn't want to see me- what I couldn't see is that she didn't want to see me very often- certainly not as often as I wanted and needed to see her. At one point I was so down and sad that I got in the car and drove to her house, hoping for some help. When I got there I could tell that she was upset that I had come over without calling her first. I could tell that she didn't have time for me, but I was desperate. I needed help so badly. I completely ignored the reality of the situation and sat at her table talking to her even though I could see she was impatient. At one point I picked up a post card that was on her table to see what country it was from. She said, "Don't read my mail!" and I still didn't see the signs. I was so ill and so desperate that I stayed there and I went back for more of the same many, many times over the next year. It wasn't that she was necessarily unkind or uncaring- it was that she was neither willing nor able to play the role I wanted her to play. She made it clear what kind of friendship she wanted and I ignored her request. Bipolar disorder does that to you. It makes you needy and desperate when you're ill. It makes you look for help from the wrong people.

Flash forward a few years later to life while treating myself with the Health Cards:

I had just created the Health Cards and was learning to control my mood swings. I met a woman named Judy at a craft fair where I was selling my jewelry and she sold her candles. We had a booth next to each other and talked a bit, but I never thought of trying to see her again except in a professional way. I thought that as she was not the same age as me and was a lawyer with a big house and two kids, we would have nothing in common. In other words, I was closed and judgmental even though my life was going better due to the tools I had created to manage the illness. One day I got a phone call from Judy. She had just designed a new pillow and was wondering if she could come over and show it to me. I agreed. We met and she showed me her amazing design. We realized that we had a common love of crafts and that we both wanted to bring art into our lives as opposed to working the typical nine to five job (which I wasn't able to do anyway). I told her about my bipolar disorder and how it affected my life and how I treated it with my own program. She was very interested and really, really listened to me. I swear that this was so totally new for me in a friend that I didn't know how to deal with it. I had been lonely for years due to the illness and the fact that my friends were in different states and different countries except for Jenny. It made me uncomfortable. I thought- why is she being so nice to me? Why does she want to see me? Jenny doesn't want to see me, so I must not be that great of a friend. Why would Judy take the time to call and come over when

Jenny gave me the cold shoulder if I ever called her at a non appointed time? So I pushed Judy away. I didn't call. But she kept calling me and she kept asking me to come over. I would go over and feel uncomfortable. Why does she want to see me? Why is she so interested in me? I just kept sabotaging the friendship. I kept calling Jenny and trying to see her and be a part of her life. It became an obsession.

Then one day it was over. I had a paranoid episode and once again, Jenny was so distant and so cold and so lacking in understanding of what life was like for me- that I finally realized that it had to stop. As my therapist said, "Julie, how long are you going to keep knocking on doors that never, ever open?" And from that moment on I decided never to knock on that door again. I wish that I had been more understanding of what Jenny wanted. I wish that I had not pushed myself on her- but bipolar disorder causes me to need help when I'm ill. That is NOTHING to be ashamed of. I had to learn that neediness is a symptom of the illness and I can do something about it by taking care of myself first and then asking for help from the right people.

And one of those people was Judy. Over the year she proved that friends can handle down swings. Friends can be there when you need them. I learned to ask for help again. I learned that as long as I had done everything that I could to help myself, it was fine to call someone and say - I need you.

I tell you this story because I want to stress that when we look for help when we are ill, we must look for help from those who are the type to handle a friendship with someone who has a mental illness. This does NOT mean that there's no room for other friends in your life. For example, now that I'm basically well, I'm able to accept friends who are not interested in helping me when I have a mood swing. It's interesting, but the friends who have been there for me and have never given up on me are often *not* the ones I wanted to turn to at first. I kept chasing those closed doors and ignoring all of the open doors from the people who truly wanted to help. I've also learned that asking for help from family members is not always the best place to look for help. They seem like the best choice, but they are people too, not just your family members. So ask yourself- Are you taking care of yourself first and then asking for help from the right people? Or are you depending on the wrong people to help you get well? Ask yourself, Are you knocking on doors that never open? Instead of doing this, I suggest you ask yourself who has shown a true interest in helping you get better and decide how can you let them into your life. These are the people who can really make a difference in your healing. These are the people you should ask to be a part of your health care team.



### **A Final Note:**

Bipolar Disorder is an illness just like any other illness. I like to think that those of us with bipolar disorder are members of a special group of highly creative and intelligent people- we just need the right tools to manage the illness so that our

true selves can shine. Give yourself time to get used to the Health Cards. It took me a year to really integrate them into my life.

If you're a friend or family member and are not sure how to get your loved one to use the cards, learn how to use them yourself and then ask your loved one to go over the sample cards with you so that you can understand the illness a bit better. This is a way to ease people into the system. It helps if you can remember that people who are newly diagnosed with the illness or who are just out of the hospital need time to adjust.

If you're struggling with bipolar disorder right now, it may help to know you're not alone. I struggle with it all of the time and I created the Health Cards! It's a serious illness that needs serious attention, but healing is possible.

This illness is treatable. It can be overwhelming, scary and frustrating, but it can be treated - all you need is a treatment plan that works for you. I wish you health and happiness.

Thank you,

Julie Fast

Here is one of the photos I took for my author web page at [www.juliefast.com](http://www.juliefast.com)  
If I can smile (or at least try to smile!) despite having this illness, you can too.

We can do it together.

