

Tips from *Intact* | Managing Anxiety, Depression, and Bipolar Depression

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Circadian Rhythms and Bipolar Depression (Chapter 5)

A lot of research points to the link between bipolar disorder and having a faulty circadian rhythm, the 24-hour internal clock controlled by the hypothalamus that affects hormonal cycles, body temperature, and the sleep/wake cycle.

“Circadian rhythm in bipolar disorder: A review of the literature” was published in the September 2018 issue of Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, and its abstract summarizes key points about the link between them:

- “Sleep disturbances and circadian rhythm dysfunction have been widely demonstrated in patients with bipolar disorder (BD).”
- “Irregularity of the sleep-wake rhythm, eveningness chronotype, abnormality of melatonin secretion, the vulnerability of clock genes, and the irregularity of social time cues have also been well-documented in BD.”
- “Circadian rhythm dysfunction is prominent in BD compared with that in major depressive disorders, implying that circadian rhythm dysfunction is a trait marker of BD.”

ADHD, ADD, and Creativity

(Chapter 20)

ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder) and ADD (attention deficit disorder) are on a continuum. Earning a teaching credential and giving birth to two highly kinesthetic children prompted me to read a variety of books and articles about ADD.

Kinesthetic learner

If you tend to think in motion, you are probably a kinesthetic learner. A kinesthetic learner does not necessarily have ADD but simply requires more movement during the learning process.

In college, I eventually figured out that I needed to sit in front and take notes in order to follow along. Often, I can't read my notes, because of my sloppy left-handed handwriting. But if I don't take notes, I can't understand what's going on. I space out, and the professor's voice fades into white noise.

My ideas for short stories, fiction, or articles generally come to me while I am moving—doing housework, taking a walk, or exercising.

Divergent thinking

Some experts debate whether you could have both bipolar depression and ADD or ADHD. In order to be highly creative, your brain has to be able to jump around and make unlikely connections.

Creativity is associated with divergent thinking, the process of creating many unique solutions to solve a problem. It is often described as spontaneous and free-flowing.

Convergent thinking

Whereas, convergent thinking relies heavily on logic. It's systematic and uses logical steps to figure out the single best solution.

Three components of creative thinking

"Three aspects of creative cognition are divergent thinking, conceptual expansion, and overcoming knowledge constraints. Divergent thinking, or the ability to think of many ideas from a single starting point, is a critical part of creative thinking," according to a 2019 Scientific American article, "The Creativity of ADHD: More insights on a positive side of a 'disorder.'"

Previous research has established that individuals with ADHD are exceptionally good at divergent thinking tasks, such as creating recipes, writing songs, and brainstorming new features for appliances. "Together with previous research, these new findings link ADHD to all three

elements of the creative cognition trio,” according to the same May 2019 Scientific American article.

Left-handedness and ADD

Ten percent of the population is predominantly left-handed, and the wiring of left-handed brains differs somewhat from right-handed brains. “Left-handed students had a probability of suffering from ADHD 2.88 times greater than right-handers,” according to a study published in June 2017 Research in Developmental Disabilities.

How Can Setting Goals Help You Focus? (Chapter 21)

Breaking down large goals into daily, weekly, and monthly goals enables me to achieve those large goals. Setting goals also decreases my anxiety and helps me focus.

Goal-setting has become one of my “anti-depressants.” Outside of those goals related to my full-time job, the goals I set mainly have to do with writing and maintaining healthy habits. One of my weekly goals is to exercise five times during the week for an average of 45 minutes, including two resistance sessions.

Here are some benefits I get from setting goals:

1. Focus on what’s important. The fear of forgetting makes me anxious. Even though I use a planner, a calendar, my phone calendar, and notes on my wrist, I still forget important things once in a while.

Writing down daily goals helps me to remember appointments and due dates. When I glance at my daily list, it also helps chase away distracting thoughts.

2. Focus on the solution. Setting a goal, no matter how small, that takes me toward fixing or resolving a problem, helps shift my focus to what is in my control and away from feeling helpless.
3. Simplify decision making. For example, if I set a goal to get my chapter done by Friday, then I know I can’t watch TV or do an Open Mic until it is done.
4. Motivation. It might sound silly, but it’s fun to beat a deadline. Deadlines motivate me as well as energize me.
5. Sense of purpose. Thinking about what’s important to me, making goals that reflect my values, and taking steps toward accomplishing what’s important to me make me feel alive. Everything can be going great in my life, but if I’m not working towards a creative or personal goal in addition to the job-related ones, I feel a little down.
6. Sense of possibility. Breaking down larger goals into smaller achievable ones opens up the world of possibility and gives me something to imagine in the future—something to look forward to. In a word—empowering.
7. Challenge. Goals provide challenges, which energize me provided they’re not overwhelming.

Find out more:

- “Effective Goal Setting Could Help People with Depression,” Zawn Villines, January 5, 2017, [GoodTherapy.org](https://www.goodtherapy.org).
- “The Importance, Benefits, and Value of Goal Setting,” Leslie Riopel, MSc., April 26, 2020, [PositivePsychology.com](https://www.positivepsychology.com).

Lasting Lessons From a Therapist (Chapter 25)

During my late twenties, my therapist, Sarah, taught me the tools I use to this day to combat anxiety and depression.

1. Treat yourself as if you were your own child. You wouldn't put down your child or say mean things to them. You would be gentle and loving.
2. When negative thinking or panic starts to build, focus on what you do have. Take yourself into the present by mentally making a quick gratitude list, such as...

"Today I have a job. Today I have a place to live. Last night I slept for seven and a half hours."

3. Remind yourself that, although you are in some degree of pain, you are functioning. Mentally list the things you take for granted that you are accomplishing despite the lousy way you feel.
4. Why am I still stuck in low self-esteem? "You're used to it. Just like a pair of ripped, faded jeans are comfortable and hard to get rid of."
5. With regards to 12-step programs, take them cafeteria-style. Take what you like and leave the rest. (She wasn't suggesting you do sobriety part of the way, she was referring to such things as attending certain meetings, whether or not a certain sponsor's rules made sense for you, and that, at the time, most 12-step programs were highly skeptical of any medication for depression or bipolar disorder.)

Routines Benefit Depression and Bipolar Depression

(Chapter 33)

Role of circadian rhythms

The circadian rhythm is the 24-hour internal clock controlled by the hypothalamus (a region of the forebrain) that affects hormonal cycles, body temperature, and your sleep/wake cycle.

Ideally, your circadian rhythm should cycle between sleepiness and alertness at regular intervals throughout the day.

Bipolar disorder is closely linked with having a shaky circadian rhythm. Regular activity, routines, help counteract this. Routines, even simple ones, can promote regular sleep, improved mood, and increased productivity.

Meals at the same time

Research has shown that eating meals at the same time every day helps synchronize the circadian system.

Your body consists of complex systems and digesting food influences the circulatory system, endocrine system, and excretory system.

Sleep

Getting to bed and waking up at the same time, or close to it, every day and getting adequate sleep is critical for someone with bipolar depression. (This was not explained to me until my last hospitalization, years after diagnosis.)

When tempted to work into the wee hours, I remind myself that if I don't get enough sleep, my shaky circadian rhythm will disrupt my brain circuitry, which could lead to mania. Mania can lead to judgment so impaired I could inadvertently place myself in life-threatening circumstances.

IPSRT

Interpersonal and Social Rhythm Therapy (IPSRT) teaches individuals how to understand and work with their biological and social rhythms in order to improve their moods.

Research has shown that routines can benefit addiction and depression as well as bipolar depression.

Benefits of routines

When you have routines in place, you know what to expect, it's easier to organize yourself around your routines, and it frees up your brain for higher-order skills, such as planning and imagining.

Routines make it easier to actively work toward counteracting negative thoughts and symptoms.

Find out more:

- Sasha Kildare, “Routine Maintenance: How Sticking to a Schedule Helps Maintain Balance,” bp Magazine, Winter 2017. bphope.com.
- Ipsrt.org, Interpersonal Social Rhythm Therapy.
- Mariana Plata, MSc, “The Power of Routines in Your Mental Health,” Psychology Today, PsychologyToday.com, October 4, 2018.
- Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, “Circadian Rhythms and Bipolar Disorder,” BBRFoundation.org, April 9, 2019.

Anxiety, Depression, and Low Self-Compassion— The Relationship (Chapter 34)

Anxiety, depression, and low self-compassion can interact, and sometimes it's hard to sort out how they influence each other.

Anxiety = What if? Depression = Why bother? Low self-compassion = I suck.

When I am experiencing major stress, I battle symptoms of what I call mild depression, but those symptoms more easily classify as anxiety and a lack of self-compassion.

Low self-compassion

Self-compassion means that you are kind to yourself and able to notice your thoughts and feelings in the present moment without judging yourself.

A lack of self-compassion is said to be characterized by:

- Feeling isolated
- Lack of mindfulness
- Harshly critical of oneself
- Inability to be kind to yourself

Most of the time I have learned to ignore the negative, internal dialogue that can emerge from my subconscious. Stepping back and becoming aware of this dynamic when it surfaces enables me to fight it and to make it disappear for a while—sometimes for a long while.

Symptoms of depression

Depression is a commonly used term, but clinical depression means you have symptoms that affect your daily functioning and last for at least two weeks. Not everyone who experiences depression experiences all of these symptoms, but common symptoms include:

- Changes in activity level
- Hopelessness or guilty thoughts
- Lack of interest in activities
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Loss of energy
- Physical aches and pains
- Sleeping too much or having difficulty getting to sleep
- Suicidal thoughts
- Trouble concentrating

Symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety is uncomfortable. It is categorized by non-stop fear or worry and one or more of the following symptoms:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Feeling tense or jumpy
- Restlessness or irritability
- Anticipating the worst and being watchful for signs of danger

Anxiety often translates into physical symptoms:

- Diarrhea
- Fatigue and insomnia
- Headaches
- Needing to urinate more often
- Pounding or racing heart
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Tremors or twitches
- Upset stomach

Feelings of apprehension or dread and a racing heart are the symptoms I experience.

Self-Compassion can Alleviate Anxiety and Depression

Research studies haven't been able to sort out exactly how effective self-compassion therapy is for alleviating chronic anxiety and depression.

Research psychologist and author Kristen Neff specializes in the study of self-compassion and describes its role in reducing anxiety and depression in Greater Good Magazine,

“When we soothe our agitated minds with self-compassion, we’re better able to notice what’s right as well as what’s wrong, so that we can orient ourselves toward that which gives us joy.”

Find out more:

- Kristen Neff, “Why Self-Compassion Trumps Self-Esteem,” Greater Good Magazine, May 27, 2011.
- Amy Louise Finlay-Jones, “The relevance of self-compassion as an intervention target in mood and anxiety disorders: A narrative review based on an emotion regulation framework,” *Clinical Psychologist* 21 (2017) p. 90–103.
- Nicole Snaith et al., “Mindfulness, self-compassion, anxiety and depression measures in South Australian yoga participants: implications for designing a yoga intervention,” *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, Volume 32, August 2018, p. 92-99.
- Alexander C. Wilson, et al., “Effectiveness of Self-Compassion Related Therapies: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis.” *Mindfulness* (2019) 10:979–995.

Temperament, Trauma, and Sensitivity

(Chapter 47)

Some compelling research addresses the impact of childhood trauma and the role temperament and environment play.

“The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study”

The 1998 ACE Study was published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. It assessed data from thousands of patients and came up with a system for categorizing and measuring the impact of various kinds of childhood trauma on all aspects of health, including mental health.

“How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime”

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris’s 2014 TED Talk references recent research that further explores and confirms what the ACE study concluded.

Harris points out that for a person with an ACE score of four or more, the likelihood of depression is four and a half times higher and for suicidality 12 times higher.

In her TED Talk, Dr. Harris says, “We now understand better than we ever have before how exposure to early adversity affects the developing brains and bodies of children. It affects areas like the nucleus accumbens, the pleasure and reward center of the brain that is implicated in substance dependence.

“It inhibits the prefrontal cortex, which is necessary for impulse control and executive function, a critical area for learning. And on MRI scans, we see measurable differences in the amygdala, the brain's fear response center.

“So, there are real neurologic reasons why folks exposed to high doses of adversity are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, and that's important to know. “

“Dandelions, tulips and orchids: evidence for the existence of low-sensitive, medium-sensitive and high-sensitive individuals”

This study published in 2018 Translational Psychiatry explained that different innate temperaments react differently to environmental stressors.

“According to empirical studies and recent theories, people differ substantially in their reactivity or sensitivity to environmental influences with some being generally more affected than others. More sensitive individuals have been described as orchids and less-sensitive ones as dandelions.”

“We also detected a third group (40%) characterized by medium sensitivity, which we refer to as tulips in keeping with the flower metaphor.”

“Elevated empathy in adults following childhood trauma”

This study published in the medical journal PLOS ONE in 2018 concluded that although experiencing childhood trauma can lead to increased vulnerability to depression and addiction, it can also lead to greater empathy.

“These findings suggest that the experience of a childhood trauma increases a person’s ability to take the perspective of another and to understand their mental and emotional states and that this impact is long-standing.”

Empaths experience music more deeply

The study “Neurophysiological effects of trait empathy in music listening” was published in Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience in 2018. It used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to explore how highly sensitive individuals who more readily experience the emotions of others experience music more profoundly.

“Our study offers novel evidence that neural circuitry involved in trait empathy is active to a greater degree in empathic individuals during perception of both simple musical tones and full musical excerpts.”

The study found that highly sensitive, empathetic individuals experience music in the brain regions for reward, social awareness, and regulation of social emotions.

Benefits of Keeping a Gratitude Journal (Chapter 58)

While enjoying a sunset with my daughter at Sunset Beach, I noticed sunlight reflecting on the waves. The rays of sunlight slowly morphed into a golden ladder. At such times, a tiny jolt passes through me and the background fades away as I experience gratitude and freeze the moment in my thoughts.

During those moments, I feel completely relaxed. Later when I reflect on that moment, I reexperience the relaxation and gratitude.

One of my sponsors told me to begin a gratitude journal many years ago.

At times, I write my list on a scrap of paper. Generally, I write my list in a journal between dinner and bedtime. Sometimes, at bedtime, I am exhausted. If I haven't yet written my list, I'm afraid to turn on the light lest it diminishes my sleepiness and makes it harder for me to get to sleep, and I recite my list in my head or write it down the next morning.

In May 2020, after eight months of a 70-hour-a-week workload, my teaching contract six weeks away from ending in the middle of a pandemic, and close to 20% unemployment in Los Angeles County, I was not feeling relaxed most of the time.

During stressful times, it seems that habits such as keeping a gratitude journal are most important. My chest is tight, I am crying on the inside, but I am functioning and even experiencing bits of joy and laughter that I can savor because I keep a gratitude journal.

Gratitude Journal Benefits

1. Shifts my focus from uncertainty and worries to whatever brought me joy that day.
2. Changes my thinking. After a few months of journaling, my thoughts during the day often go to, I am so grateful for this. I want to put it on my list.
3. Can be comforting before going to sleep or in the morning.

May 3, 2020

1. I got up early enough to say good-bye to my son who was headed back to college.
2. Read the Sunday Los Angeles Times on and off all day and got a feel for how other counties in California are experiencing COVID-19.
3. Two walks with the dog. Remembered to prompt him to sit before crossing the street (some of the time).
4. Dinner and watching 60 Minutes together with the neighbors who have become extended family.
5. Got out a lengthy job application.
6. Four minutes of blow-drying my hair saved me from grabbing the kitchen scissors to cut my own eight months-since-a-haircut-hair. It made its flyaway texture bearable.

Find out more:

- “5 Reasons Keeping a Gratitude Journal Will Change Your Life,” August 1, 2017, Goodnet.org.
- “5 Scientific Facts That Prove Gratitude is Good for You,” November 28, 2013, Goodnet.org.
- Y. Joel Wong et al., “Does gratitude writing improve the mental health of psychotherapy clients? Evidence from a randomized controlled trial,” March 28, 2018, Psychotherapy Research, 192-202.

Meditation Helps You Manage Stress

(Chapter 59)

Meditating can help change the way you manage the stress and anxiety that can lead to depression. Study after study has demonstrated that regularly meditating can rewire your brain.

Train your brain to focus

Stress and anxiety often lead to negative thinking and emotions, which can spiral out of control and immobilize you.

Meditation trains the brain to be able to sustain focus and to return to focusing on the task at hand instead of letting the negative thoughts and emotions take over.

Meditation rewires the brain

Regularly meditating can break the connection between the medial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. The medial prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain in which you worry and ruminate. The amygdala produces the fight-or-flight response and triggers the release of the stress hormone cortisol. These two regions of the brain can interact to cause depression.

How does this work?

Meditation trains you to live in the present moment by teaching you how to focus on one thing at a time. When you experience the present moment—connect to your surroundings, feel alive, feel grounded—your mind lets go of negative thoughts.

You can't rewire your brain overnight. According to research, it takes at least eight weeks of daily meditation for changes in brain chemistry to occur, but you will notice smaller changes within days.

Many ways to meditate

There are many ways to meditate, but all you need to begin is a focal point, a simple constant. It could be:

- One word or a group of words repeated over and over
- A brief prayer, or part of a prayer
- A poem, or part of a poem
- Your breathing
- Your steps as you walk
- An object

You won't be able to instantly focus on one thing. Don't be discouraged. Even those who have practiced meditation for years struggle with wandering thoughts.

The process of attempting to achieve such focus is what rewires your brain and teaches you how to relax into the present moment.

Five minutes a day

Try it and keep trying it. Even five minutes a day helps. Five minutes a day almost every single day is more beneficial than longer sessions two or three times a week.

Schedule a daily time to meditate such as upon waking up. Once you start meditating you can fall into a looser state of meditation while walking or doing repetitive tasks like gardening.

At times of stress, you can slip into your routine meditation for a few seconds instead of immediately reacting.

Basic Meditation Exercise

This exercise typically doesn't work for me, but it is an easy, basic meditation that works for others.

1. Find a quiet place.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Choose a word for your focal point. Choose any word that comforts you when you repeat it.
4. Say your focus word silently to yourself each time you exhale.
5. When your mind wanders, gently return to your word or phrase.
6. Continue for five minutes. Gradually build up to ten or twenty minutes, if possible.
7. After meditating, sit quietly with your eyes closed for another minute or so before opening your eyes.

Seeing Meditation

Instead of a word, you can make an object your focal point.

1. Choose an object. Zoom in on it. Take several deep breaths as you sharpen your focus. Pretend that the object is the only thing that exists.
2. Try not to think about the object. Try not to have any thoughts at all. Try to simply see.
3. When thoughts arise, note them and return your focus to the object.

For fun, experiment with different types of objects.

- Stationary objects—such as a statue, a plant, or a chair
- Objects found in nature—such as the ocean, a tree, clouds, etc.
- Moving objects—such as a crowd, cars on a busy street, etc.

Stretch-Dance Meditation

For two years, I did this meditation for five to ten minutes a day. I have never felt so relaxed. I noticed that I lost track of time in a good way. I would wash the dishes and move on rather than constantly checking my watch to see if I would be done on time to take care of the next chore.

1. Pick a song that you adore. (I usually play the song from my phone.)
2. Play the song.
3. Feel the music. Absorb its rhythm.
4. Let the music guide you into stretching or dancing or a little bit of both.
5. Keep listening, stretching, dancing, or both until the end of the song.
6. Repeat the song and movement if necessary.

Some of my favorite songs lately for this exercise are “Drift Away” sung by Dobie Gray, “I Took a Pill in Ibiza” (Seeb Remix) by Mike Posner, “Airplanes” by B.o.B, “Payphone” by Maroon 5, “Thunder” by Imagine Dragons, and “Pompeii” by Bastille.

Find out more:

- Britta Hölzel et al. “Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density,” *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 1919, Issue 1, January 30, 2011, p. 36-43, Harvard.edu.
- “How meditation helps with depression: A regular practice can help your brain better manage stress and anxiety that can trigger depression,” *Harvard Health*, August 2018, Harvard.edu.

How Do You Return to the Present Moment? (Chapter 60)

What if? can cascade into envisioning one catastrophe after another—each more terrifying than the one before.

I need tools to keep, What if? from escalating into incapacitating anxiety or depression. Usually, I use breathing exercises or take a break and do something physical, such as housework or yardwork. Here are some more tips.

1. Focus on your five senses, such as... Listen to the sounds around you. Feel the fabric of your clothes and focus on how they feel.
2. Look around as if you are seeing your surroundings for the first time.
3. Cultivate unselfconsciousness. Let go and stop thinking about your performance.
4. Focus on your breath. Allow mindfulness to make you more peaceful and smooth your interactions with others.
5. Enhance your engagement. Work on reducing moments of mindlessness and noticing new things to improve your mindfulness.

Find out more:

- “8 Ways to Return to the Present Moment” by Henrik Edberg, Updated March 23, 2020, PositivityBlog.com.
- “How to Live in the Present Moment: 35 Exercises and Tools (+ Quotes)” by Courtney E. Ackerman, MSc, April 26, 2020, PositivePsychology.com.
- “The Art of Now: Six Steps to Living in the Moment” by Jay Dixit, November 1, 2008, Psychology Today.