

Detecting Early Warning Signs

How do we know that a storm is about to break? Perhaps we hear thunder in the distance, the skies are dark and grey with rain clouds, and it becomes windy. If we do not want to be caught in the storm, we would probably go back home, close the windows, and secure any loose items outside of the home. Likewise, if bipolar patients become more aware of their early warning signs that signal the onset of a mood episode, they can take steps to prevent a full-blown episode of depression or mania.

Early detecting can help you intervene and prevent the mood episode. In order to be able to detect an oncoming episode, you must learn to recognize your own early warning signs and the symptoms of your illness. Each person has their own unique set of signs and symptoms although many will be common to other patients.

It is not enough to be able to recognize and detect your signs; you also need to monitor them regularly. It will not be much good if you are aware of your early warning signs and symptoms, but you continue to go through your daily life without paying much attention to the onset of the symptoms. Similarly, a person who knows that ominous grey clouds, thunder, lightning, signal an impending storm can still get caught in the storm if they are sitting on a park bench and not paying attention. Therefore, regular monitoring of early warning signs is important for the purpose of early intervention to prevent relapse.

What are Early Warning Signs?

Early warning signs of a relapse or an episode are symptoms or experiences that “forecast” or “predict” that a full-blown episode is not too far away. Some patients may think that they are not able to predict an episode but researchers have found that many bipolar patients are able to recall warning signs that come before a full-blown episode. Bipolar patients have commonly reported increased activity, decreased need for sleep, and elevated mood as early signs of mania. They also report depressed mood, loss of energy, loss of interest in people or activities, impaired concentration, and thoughts of death as early warning signs for a depressive episode. Although there are some differences in the specific early signs experienced by patients, these symptoms are often the same within each patient in subsequent episodes. Thus, although some early warning signs may be unique to individual patients, they might be quite accurate in predicting the onset of a mood episode for an individual patient.

To identify your early signs of mania and depression, ask yourself, “What am I like when my mood is mildly elevated?” “What am I like when I am mildly depressed?” Write these down and reflect on the three or four most prominent early warning signs of mania and depression. Will you be able to recognize these signs when you next experience them? This is where regular monitoring is necessary.

Planning Early Interventions

The next step is to develop an action plan that details what you will do when you recognize the warning signs. It is important to be prepared so that when the time comes, you will know what to do. Plan what you will do, what you will say, what you will ask your friends and family to do for you, etc. For example: your action plan may include a visit to your doctor, or you may ask a friend to keep your credit cards when you have an urge to shop excessively. You may request that someone drop by to visit when you stop calling them. You may want to ask your friends and family to say specific things to you to highlight the possibility that you might be becoming unwell. It is probably good to let them know the best way to say it so that it doesn’t become offensive. Detail your early intervention plans carefully and keep them somewhere that is easily accessible and visible.

Studies have shown that being aware of your warning signs, monitoring them, having an intervention plan, and acting on the plan when the need arises can help you prevent a full-blown depressive or manic episode. Start planning and monitoring now!