

Chapter Twelve

Moderating Stress and Change

The Role of Stress and Change in Management of Bipolar Disorders

All of us are challenged by stress and change. In the case of individuals with Bipolar disorder, normal life challenges can be amplified by the brain's inability to regulate mood. For some people with Bipolar disorders, small stresses - both positive and negative - have a greater impact than would be normal if the brain were regulating mood within a normal range. Especially in mania, the lessening of insight can lead to heightened stress and change because of engaging in activities that are over-stimulating or in behaviors that lead to unwanted consequences. During depression, cognitive distortions such as the inappropriate assignment of self-blame can heighten the emotional impact of stressful events and life changes. On-going assessment can help to identify areas in which skills for managing stress and change are needed.

Identification of sources of and intensity of stress for this individual can be elicited with the Holmes-Rahe and Daily Hassles scales described in Chapter Three.

Managing Stress and Change in Bipolar Disorders

Here the goal is to gain skills to manage stress and change in order to help keep mood

within a narrower range that more closely approaches normal mood rather than the extremes of mania or depression.

Interventions

Stress management techniques are common to many therapeutic approaches. Deep breathing, meditation, relaxation training and exercise are all helpful. When first learning these exercises a person with Bipolar disorder may find relaxation exercises extraordinarily challenging and frustrating. Likewise it is also difficult to effectively use these techniques if only used as a last minute or stopgap measure. It is important to emphasize that these techniques are best learned during non-stressful times and reach maximum efficacy with frequent practice during the day. Numerous books and resources exist to help individuals manage their stress effectively. A wonderful web source for therapists and consumers is "Stress Management and Emotional Wellness Links" at <http://www.optimalhealthconcepts.com>

Anticipatory planning and problem solving are skills that can be helpful in managing stress. Feedback from significant others that is solicited by the client can be helpful in identifying challenges that need to be addressed. Clients will benefit by self-monitoring for increases in symptoms, difficulties in relationships or work, and predictable times of stress and change. Making plans in advance to deal with recurrent triggers or symptoms can enable the client to manage these with avoidance when appropriate or with a previously determined plan that is written down. Discussing in advance such plans with members of an intact support system can make this strategy even more effective.

For further discussion of anticipatory plan-

ning, see Chapter Five: Early Intervention and Relapse Prevention.

Children and Adolescents

For children and adolescents, the following elements of stress management already discussed will be most helpful: identifying activities that lead to heightened stress, learning to anticipate lessening of insight during manic periods, engaging in over-stimulating activities, learning-practicing-using self-soothing activities, using the stress management techniques soon enough to avoid meltdowns, problem-solving, accepting feedback and prompts from caregivers, seeking caregiver support, self-monitoring symptoms, and planning in advance to cope with recurring triggers.

Additional steps may be necessary when working with youngsters, so some minor modifications can mean the difference between success or not. Using hands-on activities such as drawing or manipulative materials such as PlayDoh can be helpful. Drawing an Ecogram, a map of the pattern of relationships in a family system (in the Toolbox) can help the child identify the people or activities that drain or add energy, making a list of behaviors a child may display when depressed or manic is very helpful. This is the beginning step of self-monitoring and self-regulation. A list could be made together of the last few times when the child escalated during activities, to become aware of what over-stimulation really means for that particular child. Using a white board and markers to get this type of information through drawing cartoons or playing a version of Pictionary can make the discovery more fun. Of course, there is always drawing with map pencils or erasable markers on paper.

Children usually enjoy any kind of relaxation

exercise or visualization such as progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing or taped yoga programs for children, but they may have to be guided through it for several weeks and by caregivers at home before they are able to do them on their own. Finding a “fun” way to approach these exercises is useful, so as not to have the child confuse it with punishment. Children will almost surely need prompting by the caregiver to remember to initiate the self-soothing tool.

One of the most effective and long lasting techniques for lowering stress is for the child to learn a simple five-step problem solving routine. It usually takes many weeks or months of guided practice from therapists then caregivers, but the child will soon initiate problem solving on her own. Sometimes she will want to teach other children and adult family members. They seem proud to have a skill that works and that not everyone knows about.

It will be vital to describe caregiver feedback or prompting as helpful and to work out with the child what kind of signal or language will be used to remind them to use some of the self-monitoring and self-regulating skills they are learning. Many times the child will want the reminder to be only a nonverbal signal or a brief phrase like, “Would you like to go to your room and listen to some music?” This reminds us that very often, the preferred self-soothing technique of children and adolescents is listening to music they have chosen through a portable player with earphones. This would not be an item to take away if the child disobeys or is defiant. They will need access to their music for calming purposes regardless of what else they have done.

The parent and child might generate three options or ways the child can self-soothe that would not require parental monitoring. This

way the child has alternatives if one technique does not work at a given moment. Constant assessment is necessary as to how well the techniques are working and what changes would be made to reengage the child in the process of self-regulation. This is particularly important for young children who tend to tire easily with activities.

Children and adolescents will need caregiver guidance to remember and plan for recurring stressor events, such as anniversaries of trauma or losses, etc. Otherwise the approach will be the same as with adults. The therapist and caregiver will need to be willing to take the child through the steps and then provide reminders and prompts at the appropriate times.