

THE ARTERBURN WELLNESS SERIES

UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING A PERSON WITH

BIPOLAR DISORDER

*Biblical and Practical Wisdom
to Build Empathy, Preserve Boundaries,
and Show Compassion*

**STEPHEN ARTERBURN, M.Ed.
AND BECKY LYKE BROWN, M.S.**

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Life with the Person Who Is Bipolar

Most days, Janet lived on pins and needles.

As we chatted in my office I noticed the stress in her face as she explained why: “Being around my son, Jack, filled my whole being with anxiety—that feeling of doom as if something bad was going to happen. I told him once that he was my ‘wonder child’ because I always wondered what he was going to say or do next. It would often be completely out of the norm, either funny or frightening.”

That wondering about what might happen next looked different when Jack was six, sixteen, twenty-six. What was consistent, for Janet, was the anxiety of being out of control.

She said, “It was hard for me to wrap my mind around his bipolar thinking. I couldn’t figure out the logic. As a teen, Jack would start and stop activities—but not because he wasn’t successful. In fact, it was the things he would excel in that he suddenly would quit without warning. He was a great soccer player, and the last game he played was the state championship where his team won. Then he was done, refusing to play for his last two years

of high school. It seemed Jack could flip from obsession with an activity to hating the very same thing he once loved.”

They wanted to help Jack find peace and to discover the underlying cause of this hectic way of life. Seeking the help of the family doctor and then from a professional counselor, they were told of the diagnosis of bipolar disorder, which explained how Jack experienced life. The experience of parenting a child who was bipolar caused Janet to feel anxious and isolated. “Parenting a child with bipolar disorder can take everything you have and more. In my case, Jack was extremely cruel to us, in his words. He questioned our love and motives relentlessly.”

She went on to say, “There were no parenting books that I could read that spoke to my experience raising a mentally ill child. Friends could not relate to my parenting experience. I felt very alone and anxious.” Perhaps you can relate to Janet’s experience.

I can.

My Experience with Bipolar

Janet’s experience resonated with my own experience of an adult in our family who lived with bipolar disorder. Though I’m a professional clinical counselor who serves people just like Janet every day, her stories of life with Jack sounded a lot like scenes from our Thanksgiving dinner table and other family gatherings. The details were different, but the chaos was the same.

The hope I held on to in my own family, the hope I had for Janet, and the hope I have for you is that the person living with bipolar disorder is so much more than their diagnosis. As Janet described Jack, she didn’t have to tell me that he was loved, gifted,

talented, creative, athletic, and intelligent. Because Jack was created in God's image, I assumed it. Because I could recognize the unique strengths and giftings of my own family member, I assumed it. As we journey together, I will remind you that your loved one is not his or her diagnosis. She's not her behavior on her worst days. Your loved one is, like you, a unique, complicated, beautiful individual who is loved by God. My hope is that, in these pages, you will find insight into your loved one and yourself and, more specifically, that you will find a way to thrive that's not contingent on your loved one's behavior. Because I've seen what's possible, I have hope for you today.

Generations

Cynthia, another client of mine, describes her own family's difficult history. She knew what it was like to live with those who weren't well: "My maternal grandfather, mother, and one of my brothers all have bipolar disorder. Their refusal to seek help added a struggle and burden to their lives and for those of us in their wake."

Cynthia's mother, like her, had grown up in a home impacted by mental illness. She offers, "My mom told us about Grandpa's rage. Something would set him off, and he would beat his only son while the others witnessed the pain. He didn't trust anyone close to him and felt like the world was in ruin." Though the disease looked different for Cynthia's mother, the themes were the same. Cynthia said, "Mom would go from being a workaholic to barely getting out of bed. She went through extreme highs and lows, like when she came home after having back surgery and proceeded to clean the house and move living room furniture, including a large organ

and piano, by herself. Stepping in to assist her led to acts of rage, screaming, and her storming off.”

As a child, Cynthia didn’t have access to the help and support that could have made a difference in the life of her family. “I honestly wish I could have been able to drop my mom off at a place of help, but unless she was suicidal or a risk of harming someone else, that was impossible. There needs to be more help for the families who suffer in silence.”

I believe that there is hope and help for families like Cynthia’s and a family like yours. My prayer has been that this book will give you the tools and insight you need to live well. Though you can’t control the choices or behaviors of your loved one, you can begin making healthy choices that allow you to flourish.

James

James, a pastor, came to see me when he could no longer manage his relationship with his wife. He told me, “My wife isn’t the person I married. I mean, she looks like her, and I know it is her, but her bipolar disorder has taken over.” His was a story I’d heard many times from spouses, children, and parents. They, like James, discover that they are in a situation they did not choose. And, like James, they realize that their future might look different from the one they once imagined.

James began living a life he’d not anticipated when his wife was diagnosed with bipolar. She was in her early thirties, and they had two small children. James said, “I had to come to terms with a *new normal* when she was first diagnosed. We have been open with our congregation, which has allowed others to share their struggles. It doesn’t make it easier. Coping with her moods and the

many unfinished projects around our home is a part of my reality now. I am committed to her, whoever she is now, and have grieved the loss of the woman I married.”

Although heartbreaking, the journey James describes is a peek into what many families that include a person with bipolar mental illness will experience. There may even be signposts for the journey ahead of you today. You will need to release your ideas of who you believed your loved one to be. You can share your experience with people you trust. You will grieve what you’ve lost. You’ll release what you cannot control. And you’ll keep loving the person in front of you. Though the way forward may not be what you imagined for your life, trust that there is a way forward in which you will experience well-being.

Walking with a Friend

Before I’d ever considered a career in mental health, before I had resources to make sense of my experience, I witnessed the toll that mental illness could take on those who loved a person who suffered with it.

When I was very young, my best friend, Mary, lived five houses away from me. We’d tromp back and forth between our backyards and bedrooms every day. Before I had words to describe it, I noticed that Mary’s mom was different. She was the life of every party, even when there wasn’t a party. I loved her playful attitude and thought she was the funniest mom ever.

When Mary’s mom was depressed, though, it felt like that vibrant woman was completely absent. Where had she gone? I learned later that she had received electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)

treatments. She was also overmedicated, which created more difficulty than the illness itself. She'd spend many hours staring out the front picture window of their home. When she was hospitalized, I didn't understand why she wasn't around.

Mary's mom was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder—or “manic-depressive illness,” as it was known in the '60s—when we were in third grade. Throughout our childhood, she continued to be in and out of the hospital.

When I look back, I can remember the sadness and fear that perpetually showed in my friend's face as she lived through the ups and downs of her mother's condition. She was suffering, and I had no idea how to care for her.

Light-years before I ever thought about being a therapist, I had a front-row seat to the effects of a devastating illness. And I would see this illness take over many more of those I knew and loved as my life continued.

What It Means for You

Bipolar mental illness can be a terrible disorder. But that doesn't mean that there isn't hope. While a diagnosis can evoke fear and pain, it can also offer a rubric for understanding what can feel so very confusing. It provides an explanation for past behavior and can even point you toward a path forward.

And that's where this book comes in. Maintaining a relationship with an individual with bipolar disorder is complex and challenging at a variety of levels. The key to living well as you navigate a relationship with your loved one hinges on two things: understanding and love. The two are inextricable.

If you are open to learning about the disorder, if you're eager to understand why your loved one says the things she does or acts the way he does, you will be giving a gift to your loved one and to yourself. You won't be able to move forward into healthier living until you understand what your loved one is facing.

While valuable, understanding on its own won't do you much good. You could read every book ever written on bipolar disorder and still continue to suffer in relation to your loved one. The win, for you and for the person you care about, is for that understanding to move from your head to your heart. The information I'll share with you in these pages becomes useful and effectual as you live out love. As you discover some of the causes of bipolar disorder and understand how it affects your loved one, you'll be better equipped to *love well*.

Loving well when a loved one lives with bipolar disorder is twofold. You can learn strategies to love your child or parent or spouse or sibling better. Discovering what helps and what hurts will help you love the person with the diagnosis. But as you grow in your understanding, you'll also be equipped to love yourself well. And that's no small thing. When Jesus commands us to love God and love our neighbors the way we love ourselves, His assumption is that we already love ourselves! You are worth loving, worth protecting, worth respecting. Your love for the person who suffers must always be balanced with a healthy love for your own needs.

Eggshell Living

Marcus grew up in a home with a mother who had undiagnosed bipolar disorder.

He says, “As a child, I walked on eggshells every moment of every day. I read the room, I read the mood, I read the expression on my mom’s face, on my dad’s face, I read their voices, and I read the silence. I developed a sixth sense ... reading ‘emotional space.’”

This hyper-attentiveness, necessary for his emotional survival, caused Marcus to bend his behavior to the environment around him.

He reports, “I went through my childhood conforming to my mother’s emotional space every single day. If she was stable, I could be a good kid and do my chores without rocking the boat. If she was depressed and hadn’t come out of her room, then I’d better keep up with my chores *and* hers or my dad would end up blaming me for her rage when she would come out of that room and find things out of order.”

And as those in relationship with BD have discovered, there’s ultimately no way to do everything “right” enough to compensate for the person with BD. Marcus learned this the hard way.

“If she was manic,” he says, “well, look out. The very act of doing my chores could bring out her paranoia, and I would find myself at the business end of fury, accused of doing my chores just to manipulate her into being nice that day. It was usually a ‘nobody wins’ sort of battle, one that sometimes concluded with attempted suicide or total disappearance, which then meant a stint in the psych ward.” No matter what Marcus did or didn’t do, his efforts weren’t enough to do what his mother needed to do for herself.

And as he moved into adulthood, Marcus brought the old patterns of reacting to a person with BD with him.

He says, “My acquired sixth sense, built as I learned to navigate the ups and downs of my mother’s disorder, essentially became

the guiding compass of my adult relationships. If I could read someone's unreasonable emotional space, and conform my words, actions, and reactions in a way that made them comfortable ... then I felt complete. I had successfully accomplished the only job I knew how to do in a relationship!"

In a functional family, children learn to notice and meet their needs by imitating a healthy, loving adult who sees their needs and meets them. However, having grown up in a reactive environment, where his mother's needs eclipsed his own, Marcus had never learned to do that.

He explains, "By ignoring my own discomfort and needs—which I didn't even realize or acknowledge I had until my late thirties—and making sure the other person was settled and okay, I could tell myself that it had been a good day. But as I strove to meet the needs of everyone around me, I ended up ignoring my own—and I suffered greatly because of it."

Marcus's journey bears many typical marks of people in relationship with someone who has BD: he learned to be hyper-alert, he tried to improve the situation by over-performing, and he ignored his own needs. If your own relationship with someone with BD began in adulthood rather than childhood, it may look a little different, but I suspect you can relate to Marcus's situation.

Because a return to health requires the participation of the person with BD, you may or may not be able to "help" in all the ways you'd like to. What you can do is to take care of yourself. If you don't acknowledge and care for yourself—and for your children, if your spouse is bipolar—you will lose. You will lose every single time. You will lose out on developing healthy relationships

with friends, family, and a significant other. If you keep yourself anchored to the roller coaster of bipolar disorder without caring for yourself, you will lose out on experiencing the joy of fully embracing your own life.

If you're ready to care for yourself and embrace your own life while maintaining a relationship with someone who has bipolar disorder, let's press forward.

Essentials

As you discover ideas in this book that help you walk in life-giving ways, you'll begin to recognize what will work best for you. A strategy that works for one family might not work in yours. But requisite for every journey are boundaries, self-care, letting go, and forgiveness. I want to give you a peek at what those have looked like in one woman's journey and encourage you to discover what these do and can look like for you.

Boundaries

Boundaries—invisible but real separations between you and others—delineate where you begin and end in a relationship. When your boundaries are weak, you can feel overwhelmed by the others around you as they exercise too much control in your life. In a relationship with someone with BD, you might be the boundary-crosser by doing for your loved one what they have the ability to do for themselves. Perhaps you take on the caregiver role when the person hasn't asked for your help. If you're feeling overwhelmed, you may need to pay attention to your boundaries. The best book on the subject is *Boundaries* by John Townsend and Henry Cloud.

Sally has a sister who lives with BD. Though Sally has been intentional about trying to maintain good boundaries, she no longer pretends that whatever situation has been caused by BD isn't happening. Sally says, "I notice the behavior, explain why I'm choosing to respond as I am—by hanging up or leaving or finding another way to care for myself—and then I follow through." Last Thanksgiving, Sally had to practice implementing those healthy boundaries. Now she knows a bit better how to navigate family holidays. She says, "If I walk in the door for a holiday dinner at the time we're supposed to eat and the turkey is still frozen in the sink, I deduce that we're likely in the midst of an episode. My boundary is that I'm not spending the next several hours 'fixing' the situation if my loved one is in no mental state to be around people." Years of experience have taught Sally that "fixing" rarely fixes! She details the response she practices today: "I make sure she's well enough to be alone or with whoever is there, and I explain I will gladly come back another day. This usually creates an outburst, but at least I have not walked out without an explanation, even if she doesn't comprehend it or remember it later."

Self-Care

Self-care means that you are aware of your own needs and that you find ways to meet them. It starts by knowing how you feel and what you need, and then it moves toward addressing those needs. This may seem like a simple concept; however, when you are focused on helping someone in a high-maintenance relationship, you begin to lose focus on your own self-care. It can be as simple as taking a minute to assess your condition: Am I tired? Hungry?

Thirsty? Lonely? Angry? These simple questions can be a starting place. Sometimes guilt interferes with our self-care, and we need to remind ourselves that there isn't anything wrong with needing something to eat when we are hungry. That sure sounds simple, yet in the throws of the chaos that can be part of this relationship, we often delay our needs to deal with others' needs.

The obvious next step is implementing a solution: if you are tired, rest—even if it is just a five-minute time-out for yourself, sit in a quiet place and close your eyes. If you are angry, take a walk outside. Thirsty? Drink some water. Do something to address your need. These examples are simple, and as you become more aware of your personal needs, you can create your own ways of meeting those needs that are just right for you. We cannot give what we do not possess, and self-care helps us as we are helping others. Caring for yourself can include many different things, but the biggest need will be time away from the crisis, and sometimes that is the most difficult need to fill. It can feel selfish, yet it can be invaluable to the relationship and definitely helpful for your ability to navigate the maze of the disorder.

After years of bending over backward to accommodate her loved one, Sally finally decided that she was worth caring for, too. Today, she's learned how to ensure that her own needs are met. Sally says, "It wasn't until my adult years that I realized I needed to reprogram the messages in my head. I had to reprioritize. Though my default had been, 'How can I make you comfortable?' I learned how to ask, 'What do I need right now?'" Making this switch can be difficult, but it is best for everyone. Sally describes this new way of living in this way: "Because my thought processes have

been rewired to acknowledge what I want and what I need, I'm no longer constantly waiting to react to what is happening around me. It doesn't mean I'm not willing to be a good hostess or to accommodate someone else. It simply means that my own needs are now part of the equation." Sally's choice to function differently benefits her, and it benefits others. She says, "If I am healthy and whole, I can be stronger for others. I still 'read the room' no matter where I am, but I no longer take on the responsibility of becoming a doormat so someone else can feel better."

Letting Go

Letting go means that you are able to extricate yourself from an emotionally difficult situation—especially one in which you are so invested in finding the remedy! If you are experiencing tension, a feeling of constriction, this is a sign that you need to experience release. That's easy to say and harder to do, but with practice, you will recognize when you need to let go of the control you are mindlessly exerting. When you recognize this tension—maybe if you are in a conversation with your loved one and they are not hearing you—and you sense the frustration rising in you, take a step back instead of reacting. In fire emergencies, we teach children to stop, drop, and roll. You can practice something similar for letting go: Stop the struggle, Drop the issue, and Roll away from the tension. You don't have to settle every score, and there may come a better time to address the issue if it is truly something that needs to be settled. We often get entangled with emotional webs that are not life-and-death issues. Letting go is recognizing when your need to control is controlling you and choosing to release control.

Letting go isn't easy, and learning to do it well takes time. Sally says, "It took a long time for me to get to a place where I could let go of the past in order to move on to more productive ways of engaging with my bipolar sister. But eventually, I got back in touch with that little girl who used to hide under the kitchen table, waiting for a raging episode to pass, and I told that little girl, 'You are okay. You are safe.'" In order to let go, Sally needed to offer herself the kind of care that she really needed when she was a child. She says, "This set me free in the present to let go of blame and burden and to find more productive ways of engaging and managing."

Part of "letting go" for Sally was releasing her cares to God. One of the tools she used to do that was prayer. Sally says, "I always had complete faith that God would lead me if I let Him. In order to let go of my past wounds I experienced in relationship with my sister, I had to bring everything before God in prayer and faith and trust that He would provide a way forward." Graciously, God did.

Today, God is ready and able to receive the cares of your heart as you release them to Him.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is like tearing up the "IOU" and releasing another from their debt. And you are the one who benefits! Forgiveness is often a big decision, especially when you have a reason not to forgive. However, forgiveness is for your benefit because it releases you from having to manage the debt of the offense. It isn't easy to forgive when someone has hurt you, but if you choose not to forgive, the wound gets bigger as time goes on, and you are the one left with the infection, pain, and heartache. Forgiveness isn't simple, but it

is a choice that releases you. It isn't as easy as "forgive and forget." Rather, it's "I forgive because I won't be able to forget and move forward in my healing without first choosing to forgive." It isn't a free pass for someone to hurt you repeatedly, but as you forgive, recognize that people are imperfect and are capable of failure (as are you). Recognize that BD changes a person, and they are often hurtful because they themselves are in pain. It's not an excuse for them to act in whatever way they want, but it is recognizing that the disorder causes them to behave in ways they don't always have control over. Forgiveness is a great gift to yourself, allowing you to be free of the bitterness and resentment that unforgiveness plants in your heart.

Also, you may need to ask for forgiveness in order to experience release. Maybe you got angry with your loved one because of the frustration in the relationship and you are feeling guilty for being so angry. Maybe you sense resentment building toward them because of how BD has changed them and you are short tempered with them. We are all human and have faults. If you allow yourself to be vulnerable in asking for forgiveness, you are also showing them you are working toward a better relationship, despite the challenges of BD. Forgiveness is essential to a loving relationship and is beneficial for both.

At the end of the day, be gentle with yourself. Loving someone with bipolar disorder means you have lived through traumatic experiences. And it means that there will be challenges in your future. Even at varying degrees of distress, bipolar disorder will span an entire lifetime. Don't expect the roller coaster to stop. It won't, not really, not for them. But be grateful that you have the choice to buy a ticket for the ride or decide to sit it out.

Sally says, “When my sister is properly medicated, I am able to recognize her sensitive spirit and her desire to be a good sister, friend, mom, wife. And I try to rejoice in the experiences that got us this far, to a good place ‘right now.’ It’s not easy. The shadow of bipolar disorder is cold and dark. But it’s part of who I am, and I will rejoice in the journey the Lord has given me.”

Beginning the Journey

Martha’s son was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when he was fifteen. Like many families, there was a season of chaos and confusion prior to diagnosis, and there was—and forever will be—“life after diagnosis.” Without minimizing the challenges, I want to suggest that there is power in understanding. Learning about the disorder is like placing new tools in your tool belt that can help you and help your loved one.

Martha understands what it’s like to witness distressing behaviors without understanding them and also knows how empowering it can feel to move forward after a diagnosis. Martha explains, “Before I knew what was going on with my son, I felt hopeless. Watching your child, who has been blessed with so many gifts, struggle so hard, and not knowing what was wrong or how to help him is a hopeless feeling.” Though life wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows when her family received a diagnosis for her son, it did mark a shift in how they were able to face and deal with the illness.

Martha says, “When the doctor suggested that Richard had Bipolar II, I wasn’t really surprised. Although I wouldn’t have guessed it, when I learned more about it, I looked at our family

history and read everything I could about bipolar, and it really made sense.”

It finally *made sense*.

“I feel guilty,” Martha confesses, “that I didn’t recognize what was going on with him earlier. If I had, perhaps he wouldn’t have missed out on opportunities to get help.”

Naming what was really going on was an opportunity to get help and move forward. It was for Martha, and it can be for you, too.

Don’t give up hope. Life with a loved one who lives with bipolar illness can still be one of joy and fullness—especially as you learn to navigate this difficult path with tools and help from others. As you continue the journey of understanding and loving your loved one who has bipolar disorder, remember the words of the psalmist: “I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along” (Psalm 40:1–2).

To move forward with your loved one, it will help you to know and understand their story. Understanding the disorder, having empathy for the sufferer, will bless them and bless you. In the next chapter, I’m going to give you some ways to understand what your loved one is experiencing. My hope is that you will experience peace in the chaos and will have a greater confidence in knowing you are not alone. As you read on, know that I know your story is uniquely yours; however, you will gain insight from others’ journeys, and you will be encouraged as you realize others have found their way through the challenges.