



# A delicate balance

By Stephanie Stephens

Y

ou walk the tightrope, drooping balance pole in hand, carefully and delicately placing one foot in front of the other, correcting quickly as your body sways precariously far left, then right. (Whew!) Now you're safe, headed straight down the middle as you maintain your balance, something all human beings seek. With bipolar disorder, however, it's generally acknowledged that "staying the course" is more difficult. You've heard it before: Life is a journey, and many of us continually seek balance along life's way.

No one said it is easy, but you can do it. Make the most of a great life. Even if you don't remember the '70s hit song by the same name, enjoy the best of being "stuck in the middle with you."

## Patience, please

"Don't beat yourself up. Don't feel guilty." Lori Daigneault shares good advice here. "I cried and cried when I looked up the word 'bipolar.' I had a hard time accepting

it initially. It's why I also have a hard time taking medication, for I'm supposed to be a strong woman: Hear me roar!"

Lori, age 31 of North Hampton, Massachusetts, was diagnosed at 25. She recalls that during one manic episode, she got a tattoo of Chinese symbols that represent "balance." It's an on-site reminder that "everybody does have their own troubles and worries, just not the same as mine." That reality is validated

Join the  
conversation  
**new**  
Visit  
the new  
**bphope.com**

when she corresponds on the Internet support forum, Mentally Ill Mommies (through Delphi Forums). “We have a lot of similarities,” she says, “even though we don’t have the same illness.” Her 7-year-old son who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) pushes her balance buttons, too. “Sometimes he’s great therapy,” she says. “Sometimes he’s really hard to take care of.”

Achieving balance is a work in progress. “I hope to get in balance and stay there, even though I don’t hold my breath for it,” she says. Lori wrote prolifically on another Internet site, [www.Pendulum.org](http://www.Pendulum.org), that although staying “medication compliant” is tough, it is critical to maintaining an even keel, as is seeing her cognitive behavioral therapist weekly and her psychiatrist every month

and a half. She has written that “I try to find balance in all areas of life, i.e., not all day on the computer, not all day doing any one thing—making time for everything. I keep busy and active. I try to get outside and walk at least once a day. ... I take help when it is offered (something that has always been difficult for me). I recognize my limitations, but also don’t limit myself too much. ... I still have to think for myself,” (taken from [www.pendulum.org/bpnews/archive/001648.html](http://www.pendulum.org/bpnews/archive/001648.html)).

Know that you’re responsible for you, and sometimes that means being tough with yourself. “Learning to set boundaries has helped me,” says Robert Devitt, age 62 of Lindsay, Ontario. “I set my mind on things that are important and let ‘politics’ go away. Look for the good in people.” Robert says he’d “get into trouble” during manic episodes “when my mind would race. I’d say or do things I wouldn’t normally do, then

pay the price by getting depressed.”

A retiree, Robert listens intently to his CD collection of gospel and country and western music, and he does “a lot of walking. It gets me out of the house and my thoughts off what’s bothering me.” Plus he has a strong faith, saying, “I believe God can help us in any way, no matter the problem.” He calls that the “biggest balance.”

## Play to win

Life’s a game. “I’m playing chess with myself and can’t let either side win, or I go off balance,” confides budding fashion designer Atara Stern of Merion, Pennsylvania. Now age 23, she was diagnosed at 14, and since then, she has frequently contemplated achieving that balanced state, knowing others don’t necessarily have it better.

“Being bipolar has been a blessing in many ways, making me more sensitive to others and their senses of humor and the ability to appreciate their struggles,” says

Atara, who talks about her faith, too. “I also have more of a unique take on the world, which has both helped me and hurt me. Would I give back having bipolar disorder if I could?”

Atara is Jewish and relates that in Judaism “there is something called ‘peklach,’ or

‘baggage.’ We are taught through folklore that everyone, if given the opportunity to choose what ‘peklach’ they would have, would honestly choose their own.”

The ultimate balance that Atara believes is available to all of us, she describes poignantly as “God weaves the tapestry. We must go blindly on in the face of adversity, with the hope and knowledge that some day, we will see the beautiful side [of the tapestry] and live in happiness and peace. If we keep going on the road we’re already headed out on (good, for the most part, faced with a few poisonous mushrooms and apples and hemlocks along the way—disease,



“I recognize my limitations, but also don’t limit myself too much ...”

sadness, and death), we do have the innate ability to achieve the ultimate goal: true balance, and happiness.”

Calling bipolar “an everyman’s illness, with lots of different levels,” Sarah Broderick, age 43 of Anacortes, Washington, advises you to be patient, please. As she says, “It takes a long time to know what your needs are.” Sarah has learned this; she was diagnosed at age 18.

Sarah lists tactics that “all work to a great degree: medications; talk therapy; seeing my psychiatrist; working out; spending time with nature and fresh air; finding ‘alone time’ and doing something special for myself like a facial or a hike; making and keeping friends that you love and trust and vice versa; having a job, even if it is very part time and/or volunteer work; eating well and getting enough sleep, and reading *bp Magazine*. A person who doesn’t have bipolar disorder would do most of these things to have a

healthy life. The difference is, for a person who has bipolar disorder, living day-to-day, doing all of those things can be a daily struggle.”

For Sarah, balance also means the joys of professional dog training and canine companionship. She works with Summit Assistance Dogs ([www.SummitDogs.org](http://www.SummitDogs.org)) and loves life with psychiatric assistance dog, Luna, whom she trained. Pets play a pivotal role in the balancing act, giving unconditional love and acceptance: There’s nothing like a soft paw on your lap to put a person back on the balance track.

“How do I try to stay balanced? A huge desire to be so,” says Sarah. “My number

“There’s nothing like a soft paw on your lap to put a person back on the balance track.”

one fear is to be out of balance. I try very hard to make it all work, every single day.”

### Working together

*Scene change:* off that high wire and now you’re in a skinny canoe, paddling away,

and both you and your doctor stay centered and low, as you row, row, row.

“When patients come for help, they need to put their oar in the water because their input matters. What they think, feel, and do, is what we have to work with. Patient feedback is our guide to treatment decisions.” That’s the seasoned opinion of the international medical adviser for

## SOUND OFF!

**All of us seek “balance” in our lives. For *bp* readers, “balance” can be the ultimate challenge. If you have found a technique or special way of achieving equilibrium, please share it with us.**

### ***Our readers reply:***

**I am a married homemaker with three teenage children.** My children have very busy lives with school and sporting events. Finding balance is important, but very difficult at times. Each morning, I write a list of all the day’s activities, including chores and dinner plans. I then rank them on an ABC list with A being most important (appointments, ballgames, etc.), and C being least important (things that can wait until next week). It depends on how I am doing that day as to how much of this list I will be able to accomplish. For me, balance is different when I am in a depressive state than when I

am in a manic state. During my depression, usually only one or two things get achieved. My family comes first, so if a ballgame was all that I accomplished that day, then that was all I could handle. During a manic episode, it is very hard to keep from doing everything on my list. However, I know that by overdoing it I will usually have a bad “next day.” If I follow this list, things don’t become so overwhelming and my day doesn’t have as much anxiety. I know that the best thing for my family is to take care of myself and to use as many coping skills as I can. Having balance helps me manage my illness, which makes life easier on me and my family.

—Laura Geiger, Colorado Springs, CO

**For me, the most important aspect in achieving stability and equilibrium is handling stress—even happy events such as a cross-country trip to see a friend can cause a stress-induced episode. When I can’t avoid the stress of a major event, I try to minimize the impact by taking good care of myself even to the point**

of putting other activities and commitments on hold so that I don’t become overwhelmed. Sometimes I just can’t cope, however, and I have to hand the problem over to my husband.

—S.G., Carmel, IN

### **Recovery Incorporated offers a special way**

**of regaining balance** to all who deal with emotional or mental illness. Information regarding the group can be found in your local phone book, or by writing, calling, or emailing the International Headquarters at 802 North Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60610 (312-337-5661; [www.recovery-inc.com](http://www.recovery-inc.com)).

The method taught here—together with proper medication and professional advice—continues to help me maintain balance in my own life.

—Beverly Zweig, Hollis, NY

the Organization for Bipolar Affective Disorder (OBAD) in Calgary, Alberta. Canadian Chris P. Gorman, MD, FRCPC, FAPA, is also staff psychiatrist at Psychiatric Centers of San Diego and medical director of Palomar Hospital Day Treatment Program in Escondido, California. He believes that finding balance involves a partnership of patient and health-care provider, and that it's important that both appreciate the positives of having bipolar.

"The doctor has a lot of knowledge, but so does the patient, whose perspective is always taken into account," says Dr. Gorman. "Our patients need to know that we do everything we can to help them achieve their goals first. Otherwise we deal with the 'balance-upsetting' issue of noncompliance."

Dr. Gorman appreciates the patient's ability to "think faster, persevere more, have more energy, and be more creative." Dr. Gorman continues, "If you have more

assets than others by having bipolar, I don't plan to eliminate the benefits. It's like pruning a tree! Get rid of the negatives—the branches—but don't cut the trunk."

Dr. Gorman has developed a recipe for finding balance that also applies to "the rest of us" who seek optimum health. First, everybody needs enough sleep, at least eight hours a night. That workaholic next to your cubicle bragging, "I get up at 4:30 to go to work until 7 p.m."—don't even go there yourself.

Then, he continues, "part of our biology is movement and thus it's important. Exercise doesn't have to be a dirty word that means cartwheels or running marathons, but it can mean going for short walks to start. Do it with a friend and they'll benefit from your company, you'll benefit from theirs, and

that lends itself to a shared view of the world ... a balanced view."

*Now enter medication:*

"You want a doctor to help manage your mood disorder, not to place you in a box.

The psychiatrist's goal can be: 'I don't want you to be like other people; I want you to be like *you*,'" Dr. Gorman says, encouraging you to integrate your medication with a form of talk therapy in which you actively participate.

Time for more visualization, so close your eyes and remember those old watch commercials in which John Cameron Swayze would torture a reliable, affordable Timex and quip, "It takes a licking, but keeps on ticking." You, with bipolar, are not just a Timex, but a luxury Piaget, says Ellen Frank, PhD, professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of



## SOUND OFF!

### I'm 52 and experience mixed state bipolar.

I wanted more personal influence in my mental health beyond medication adjustments. Last year, I started water aerobics, exercising two to three times a week. There are days when it's very challenging just to get to the pool, but I know I will be proud, more energetic, and feel more mentally balanced. Follow-through is a challenge, but I can now cope better with personal difficulties—I'm balancing my mental health with my physical health.

—Joni Halvorson, Healdsburg, CA

### Achieving balance with bipolar is no easy feat;

nonetheless, every effort is worth it. For me, my juggling act consists of utilizing my Higher Power, a check-in system with my physician, staying on my meds, sharing in a support group, [practicing] Kundalini Yoga, and maintaining open communications with a friend who is also

a professional coach. From this blend of "soup," comes a steady foundation, ways to channel energy, reach out to others, and monitor my "governing" emotions.

—Tzfeera Ritcherson-Levi, Atlanta, GA

### My husband and I teach the (NAMI) "Family to Family"

course, which gives as a central message "balance begets stability" for both the person who has a brain disease and the caretaker. To achieve balance, I try to meditate daily while holding a rock that reads "balance" (see photo to the right). Our daughter, a junior at a university, keeps a screen-saver picture of the same rock on her laptop to remind her of this secret of success.

—Jamie Weil, Torrance, CA

### A critical ingredient to maintaining "balance"

in my life is exercise. In the past, when I have slacked off, or gone through a period of busyness that interfered with my routine, within about a week or so I inevitably began to notice increased internal chaos. I have learned the hard way that exercise is non-negotiable.

—K. B., Upland, CA



Pittsburgh School of Medicine and director of the Depression and Manic Depression Prevention Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic.

“It’s pretty clear that those who have bipolar have very delicate, fragile, sensitive circadian systems and that your body’s clock needs exquisite, careful care. Be your own watchmaker,” advises this expert, and retain that routine, that balance, along with your wonderful spontaneity “as long as you go to bed and get up at approximately the same time every day, including weekends.”

In fact, you’re “setting the body’s clock” with this regular routine, and when you exercise, when you go out initially each day, and when you take

“You, with bipolar, are not just a Timex, but a luxury Piaget ...”

medication, says Dr. Frank. “When patients actually do this, they generally feel better.”

Dr. Frank is not conjecturing here, citing a study she led that was published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, September 2005,

and entitled, “Two-year outcomes for interpersonal and social rhythm therapy in individuals with bipolar I disorder.”

“The extent [to which] patients increased regularity of daily routines,” says Dr. Frank, “was related to how long they were protected against new episodes of illness, both mania and depression.” It’s a philosophy that has evolved for more than a decade, she says, and one frequently called into

play in her busy and respected research group.

So, let’s consider another analogy. Imagine a teeter-totter, and you’re standing securely in the middle, on the fulcrum, as two friends gleefully bounce up-and-down on each side. Talk about balance: you’re learning the skill! You are balancing what must be done, whether dictated by work or family, plus you have allocated time for nurturing your mind and body, with input from your doctor, therapist, family, and support group. You can now say “yes” to what’s best for you and “no” to what’s not. And even when things get slightly off-kilter, you right yourself back to center, and continue the positive growth that is your own personal journey. ●

*Stephanie Stephens is an award-winning journalist, specializing in health, who lives in California and New Zealand.*

**In achieving balance with bipolar, I was always “too hyper” or “too fast.”** On the other end of the spectrum, I was either “too depressed” or “too tired.” I’ve been on a pendulum for years. Now that I’m stabilized, I seem more even on the outside, but inside I struggle with achieving the “perfect” mood that I once believed I had. I find my balance by listening more

instead of talking, and also by slowing down to absorb the little things in life that I once took for granted. I now don’t get as angry when things don’t go “perfectly” and I am no longer defensive with people.

—Shelley R., Buffalo, NY

**Balance is having inner and outer harmony—achieving this is my daily goal.** If there is external disharmony I eliminate it, such as cancelling an engagement, or turning off a radio or TV show. If it’s internal, I check my sleep patterns in my diary, also my eating habits, and then I shut down the computer for two days and take time off, making sure I get plenty of exercise and yoga. If I’m still unbalanced, I call my doctor, as I have a tendency to overwork and not be aware of it.

—Sandy Hall, Honolulu, HI

**“I find my balance by listening more instead of talking, and also by slowing down to absorb the little things in life that I once took for granted.”**

**I keep balance in my life by alternating activities** with times of quiet thinking and relaxation, and by working in my garden from early spring to early fall. I also journal and visit with my neighbors to slow down my life-style. I am active in one class at my mental health center.

I go to Topeka, Kansas, once a month to take a class on disabilities. I also do a lot of writing to family and friends—this helps me to express myself and sometimes to let out feelings that I must deal with in life. I also pray, read my Bible, and read devotional books to give me the peace of soul that I need in my life, which gets pretty hectic having bipolar.

—Nancy Soeken, Great Bend, KA

**I achieve balance in my life by watching my stress levels,** eating a healthy diet, and by exercising. My friends and family play a huge role in my life. They are helpful as a support and they can also offer me advice when I feel out of balance.

—M. W., Calgary, AB

# Send your opinion for the Fall SOUND OFF!

## We want to hear your voice.

In each issue, *bp Magazine* asks a question and in the following issue, selected responses are printed and also placed on *bp Magazine*’s Web site, [www.bphope.com/soundoff](http://www.bphope.com/soundoff). In the Fall issue, answers to this SOUND OFF! question will be printed:

**Are you a parent who is watchful of your child exhibiting signs of early-onset or teen bipolar disorder? If so, how do you monitor these concerns? Please share your thoughts and comments in 75 words or less by August 3, 2007.**

Email your response to [soundoff@bphope.com](mailto:soundoff@bphope.com). Include your permission, phone number (for contact only) and how your name should appear. Or mail us at SOUND OFF!, *bp Magazine*, 374 Delaware Ave. Suite 302, Buffalo, NY 14202.