

Beating Bipolar review

Where do I begin?

www.beatingbipolar.org	This is the main website. Creating an account here will let you begin the programme.
ecommunity.org.uk	This is the Bipolar UK eCommunity website. Registering for this website will allow you to access the group discussions in the Beating Bipolar forum (which is in the self-management section.)
ncmh.info/bepcymru	This is the website for the National Centre for Mental Health (in Wales.) If you support someone with bipolar disorder, then this website lets you access the modules <i>Partners, Families and Carers</i> and <i>Women and Bipolar Disorder</i> .)

First Impressions

One of the first things that I saw, on the opening page of the Beating Bipolar website were two columns. The first headed, "Beating Bipolar gives you..." The second column read, "Beating Bipolar cannot provide..."

That honesty appealed to me. I liked the clarity of how that was set out to me before I'd created an account, or started the first of the eight modules.

What is Beating Bipolar?

Beating Bipolar is an educational website about leading a healthy life with a bipolar disorder. It was developed from the Bipolar Education Programme Cymru (BEP Cymru) which is carried out in groups over a series of ten sessions. The programme was developed at Cardiff University to allow more people to

access education and support. The content of Beating Bipolar has been developed and draws on experience and feedback taken from the BEP Cymru. Beating Bipolar is made up of eight sessions, which can be completed in your own time. It is suggested that you complete at least one session every two weeks. The sessions take about twenty minutes to complete. They consist of information and a variety of short video clips from staff, patients and their families. Each video clip pauses at the end, which means the next one won't start until you click the play arrow in the bottom right. I found this gave me a breathing space to think about what I had just seen and heard. It also helped me to

The eight modules covered are:

1. *What is bipolar disorder?*
2. *What causes bipolar disorder?*
3. *Medication*
4. *Lifestyle*
5. *Relapse prevention and early intervention*
6. *Psychological approaches*
7. *Partners, families and carers*
8. *Women and bipolar disorder*

focus better on the content of the clips. Each session is divided into five sections, so that you can replay the individual sections and also skip through them if needed. This meant I could quickly return to find the individual parts of sessions that I wanted to see again.

My experience of using Beating Bipolar

Over the course of eight sessions, a portfolio of information is built up from your answers to a series of questions on the current topic. The portfolio is built up throughout the eight sessions to show how your own symptoms combine to form an episode and the overall spread of episodes over the course of your life. It shows you the risk factors that you CAN change in the order that you've ranked them (this includes the chance to add your own personal factors). There is a very helpful session on medication, with a series of questions about your personal thoughts and feelings about medication. The results of this are added to your portfolio so you can view them later. The portfolio has another section which lets you compare the pros and cons of taking medication. I thought the two sections about medication handled a large and emotive topic clearly and with sensitivity. It certainly allowed me to clarify my own feelings in an open way. At no point did I feel that I was being told how I should view medication. Yet at the same time I did feel that I learned a lot of useful information. Looking back on my answers from a month ago, I can see that the pros and cons I've given are clearly mine; based on my own experience. You also get to compare your answers before and after completing the module. The portfolio can be viewed at any time and can be changed by repeating the relevant questions. This takes away some of the pressure to find or remember information. It also meant that I was able to go through and complete a session when I wasn't able to answer all of the questions.

The rest of the portfolio shows (positive) lifestyle factors in order of importance and triggers and relapse warning signs for both depression and mania. Lastly, an early warning signature is described with your own top three symptoms for depression and mania with steps agreed for coping with them. By retelling my own story, in this way I felt that my memories were being treated as valuable and meaningful. By relying upon and trusting my own recollections and opinions, it helped me to see the bigger picture of recovery as a part of my life story.

eCommunity forum allows safe sharing and discussion

In Beating Bipolar the group discussions around life experience from BEPCymru move to an online support forum. The Bipolar UK eCommunity forum has a self-management section which includes discussion and support, moderated by the Cardiff university team, on the subject of Beating Bipolar. It is highly recommended during the Beating Bipolar programme that participants make full use of this forum to support their learning. On top of this, within the eCommunity forum, are a number of other areas of discussion around bipolar disorder which may prove useful and interesting as well. Further support from Healthcare Learning on any aspect of Beating Bipolar is available by telephone or e-mail. During the course, it is always clear which is the most appropriate source of advice and support for you to turn to. I found it quite clear how the responsibilities were divided between Beating Bipolar, the online forum discussions and your own care team.

If you support someone with bipolar disorder

Session seven of Beating Bipolar is titled *Partners, families and carers*. It is intended to be completed together with the people closest to you in your life. It looks at developing a positive and realistic long-term mindset towards bipolar disorder. It allows you to describe your triggers and warning signs and helps you to find the best way of communicating these. It also looks at lifestyle factors so that you can create an environment at home that promotes wellness. In this way Beating Bipolar fits well with existing support networks and sources of education and treatment. It's always clear what Beating Bipolar gives you and what it cannot provide.

There is also a way for carers and professionals to directly access the support modules, on the National Centre for Mental Health website. In total there are five modules available on the National Centre for Mental Health website. Two of these modules are taken directly from Beating Bipolar: *Partners, families and carers*, and also *Women with bipolar disorder*. There are also three additional modules called *Diagnosing bipolar disorder*, *Learning programme for midwives* and *Working with bipolar*.

Beating Bipolar is a valuable resource

Overall there is a lot to recommend Beating Bipolar. It is free, sessions are short and the video clips are succinct and concise. You can complete it at a pace that suits you. It complements existing care and support whilst fostering a degree of self-reliance. It is actively being developed and improved upon and it introduces you to online discussion and support in a safe, moderated forum.

I found it very good as a source of safe, reliable information. It can be difficult to find and access this type of information and support. Beating Bipolar has no waiting lists, timetable or any need for you to travel.

I think Beating Bipolar encouraged me to see useful lessons in the periods of illness in my life. It actually gave me a record of the lessons divided into symptoms, risk factors and relapse warning signs. This list can be accessed at anytime on the website, it can be viewed on the smart phone app or you can print it out. This means you can share your mood diaries and portfolio with anyone you choose to. You can also complete, or repeat, any of the sessions with anyone you choose to.

Suggestions for getting the most from Beating Bipolar

- Tell people close to you that you are using it, explain what it is, let them know how you are finding it and offer to share any relevant parts.
- Be prepared to put down information that you're not 100% confident with at first. See it as a work in progress and add in extra information or change information later.
- The information in the portfolio is laid out in a way that allows you to talk to your psychiatrist, GP or community psychiatric nurse. It can be used to aid and reinforce communication about your current and recent mental health.
- Use the support forum to hear other people's experiences, to discuss your own and to hear about other useful forms of help such as support groups. Describing and sharing your experience is an important experience to have. It is a skill which you are encouraged to develop throughout the Beating Bipolar sessions.
- Don't feel discouraged if you have to return to the program after a break. Any answers you've given will be saved and you can restart where you left off.

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