

## Reading Lines: Coping and Recovery

*Jim was a 30 year old man who had bipolar disorder since he was a teenager. He was still able to finish college and get a good job, even with some episodes of depression and manic behavior. He was only hospitalized once since he was 20 years old.*

### **Part 1 - Using Medication**

**Jim:** “I had my doubts that my medication was helping, but I kept taking it. Once when I changed insurances, the pills got to be too expensive, so I stopped taking them. That was when I had a manic episode. I ended up in the hospital that time. I’ll never do that again.”

**Friend:** “It sounds like you learned that medication is really important to keep you healthy, so you need to take it every day. Is that what has kept your life on track?”

**Jim:** “Yes, but it wasn’t easy. Taking medication doesn’t seem natural. When behavior and mood changes happened, I just wanted to deny that the problems were caused by my illness. I wanted to think they were just from my unique personality - But my mood swings were just **too much.**”

**Friend:** “Do you think the medication changed your personality?”

**Jim:** “No, not really. But it did make me feel less depressed. And when my mood was swinging toward “manic”, I could still eat and sleep. Instead of feeling like I could do anything, it helped me think clearer, so I was safer and less impulsive. I don’t think I could have finished college or kept my job without taking the medication to help keep my moods stable.”

### **Part 2 - Safety**

**Friend:** “I think of mental illness the same way as physical illness. With heart disease, you take the medication unless the doctor says you don’t need it anymore. You know it’s too risky to go without it.”

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**Jim:** “Yes, I took risks when I was younger. I really didn’t believe I needed the pills every day, and I didn’t always take them. My parents brought me to the hospital a few times when I was close to hurting myself. There were even times when I lost my temper and could have hurt someone.”

**Friend:** “It can be really hard for families to see a person they love hurting themselves or acting like they are out of control. They want to keep you safe until you get the help you need. If there is a safety problem, police can bring you to the hospital even if you are not willing to come voluntarily.”

**Jim:** “Yes, sometimes going to the hospital is the best thing to do. I couldn’t always tell when I was getting worse. I should have listened to my family and friends when they told me I needed help. After I got older and understood my illness better, it got easier to keep myself healthy and safe.”

### Part 3 - Healthy Lifestyle

**Friend:** “I know that now you follow the treatment plan you and your doctor agreed on. It sounds like you also learned other ways to help yourself stay as healthy as possible. What do you do to take care of yourself besides taking your medication?”

**Jim:** “I try to keep a sensible lifestyle, choose healthy foods, exercise regularly, limit caffeine, and avoid alcohol. I actually quit drinking any alcohol because when I drank, my medication didn’t work. I know some other people who have had the same problem. ”

**Friend:** “Alcohol is actually a depressant. People who think drinking or drugs will help their mood are kidding themselves. People who use antidepressants, mood stabilizers, or other psychiatric medications along with alcohol or street drugs can have dangerous effects. They can have bad interactions with the medications, or their illness can get worse because of drinking or using street drugs.”

**Jim:** “My medications really help control my symptoms, but since I have a mental illness, I’m always watching for early warning signs of relapse. Like when I start

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having trouble falling asleep at night, I know it's a problem for me. If I go more than one night without sleep, I take a sleeping pill. Otherwise, I tend to start a manic episode and be unable to sleep for days or weeks."

**Friend:** "Do you think having good sleeping habits and a healthy lifestyle helps to control your bipolar disorder?"

**Jim:** "I think so. Healthy habits, like exercising, can help me to cope better. I want to take as little medication as possible, so I keep in touch with my doctor about my symptoms."

**Friend:** "So your doctor changes the dose of your medications based on how you feel?"

**Jim:** "Yes, sometimes I need more or less medication because of what's going on in my life, and whether I feel depressed or manic. So far, I have had very few side effects, and have kept my medical bills from getting real high. I know that my pills are expensive, but going to the hospital is much worse."

**Friend:** "It must be hard for people that can't afford their medications. But I heard about some programs that can help people pay for them. Social workers, doctors, and nurses can help you look into that if you ever have trouble getting your medications."

**Jim:** "I should look into that next time I see my doctor. Any financial help I could get would really help me. I have also called the 211 information and crisis line a few times to find out where I can get help. I'm glad to know it is there if I need it."

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*Peg was a 42 year old woman who came to the hospital for depression and anxiety. Her husband had recently moved out. She had suicidal thoughts, but came to the hospital for help instead of hurting herself.*

*After some medication changes and a few days in the psychiatric unit, she was not feeling suicidal anymore, her anxiety and depression had improved, and she was getting ready for discharge.*

### **Part 4 - Coping with Side Effects**

**Peg:** “My pills are making me miserable. I don’t think I am ready to go home.”

**Nurse:** “Your pills are bothering you? Tell me what’s wrong. I’d like to help.”

**Peg:** “I am too tired from the pills. They help me sleep better, but I don’t have as much energy as I used to. I used to be up cleaning my house during the night when I was too nervous to sleep. Now I sleep all night and take a nap in the afternoon.”

**Nurse:** “Many people who are in the hospital sleep a lot. You probably won’t be as tired at home because there will be more things for you to do there. Sometimes you feel tired as you are still getting used to your medications.”

**Peg:** “I guess the pills do help me sleep better at night. And they help prevent my panic attacks and flashbacks. When I am awake, I’m able to do more things because I’m not as nervous. My hands used to shake a lot, so I had a hard time dialing the phone. Now, instead of shakiness, I just have a dry mouth, and constipation.”

**Nurse:** “Let’s try some gum or hard candy for your dry mouth. Drink plenty of water- not just soda pop or coffee. And keep some water by your bed at night. Check with your doctor about using a stool softener or laxative when you need it. More fluids, fiber, and exercise can be very helpful, too.”

**Nurse:** “I’m glad you realize how important it is to take your medication. Even with a few side effects, it is much better that you are in control of your illness. It’s

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like a chronic physical illness – Think of it like a heart problem or diabetes. You need the medication your doctor prescribed.”

**Peg:** “Do you mean I will always be taking these pills? Look at all the side effects they have!”

**Nurse:** “They list all of the side effects that people have ever had from that medication. Yes, you could have some of them, or you could be lucky and have very mild side effects that you don’t even notice. Sometimes side effects happen during the first few days or weeks, and then they go away when your body gets used to the medication.”

**Peg:** “It’s hard to know if side effects, like changes in appetite, changes in sexual desire or having thoughts about hurting myself are from the illness, my mood, or from the medication. I had some of those symptoms before I started taking the pills.”

**Nurse:** “That’s right. It can be hard to tell. But you and your doctor have to talk to each other often enough to know how the medications are working for you. Tell your doctor exactly what symptoms you are having. Sometimes the medication or the dose needs to be changed.”

### **Part 5 - Discharge from the hospital**

**Peg:** “I don’t like taking pills, but I sure don’t want to be so depressed ever again. I felt so much panic and hopelessness that I actually thought my family would be better off without me.”

**Nurse:** “Those must be terrible feelings. It’s good that you came to the hospital to get help instead of hurting yourself. It is important to keep you safe and get the right treatment as soon as possible.”

**Peg:** “I won’t be seeing my doctor for almost two weeks after discharge. If I’m not sure the medications are working well enough yet, how can I be ready to go home?”

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**Nurse:** “Many of the medications take several weeks to be working at their best. And some have to be increased or decreased slowly. Since you already feel a little better, and are not feeling suicidal anymore, you are safe to go home with your family.”

**Peg:** “I suppose it is normal to feel overwhelmed about discharge with everything I have been through. My life has changed a lot since my husband left. Now I have to take care of myself.”

**Nurse:** “Give yourself some time to adjust, and find more ways to cope. Your treatment, counseling, and medication will help you have a successful recovery. Find out more about your illness and your medication, so you can stay in control of your health as much as possible.”