

Taking Bipolar to School: Success, Support, and Self-Advocacy

By Pilar Cárdenas-Gimber

"A diagnosis is information, not a limitation."

Bipolar Disorder is a Biological Medical Condition

Bipolar disorder directly affects a student's mood, energy, sleep, thinking, concentration, and executive functioning.

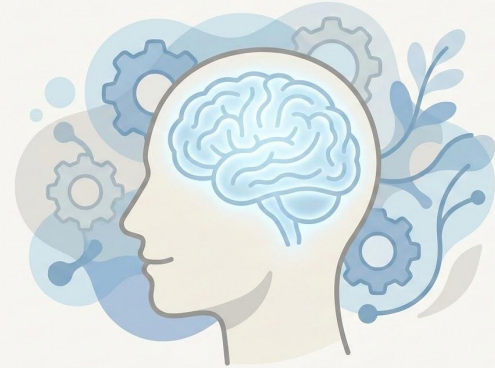
It is not laziness, lack of intelligence, or a character flaw.

- **Depressive Episodes**

Cause low energy, slowed thinking, reduced motivation, and difficulty concentrating.

- **Manic or Hypomanic Episodes**

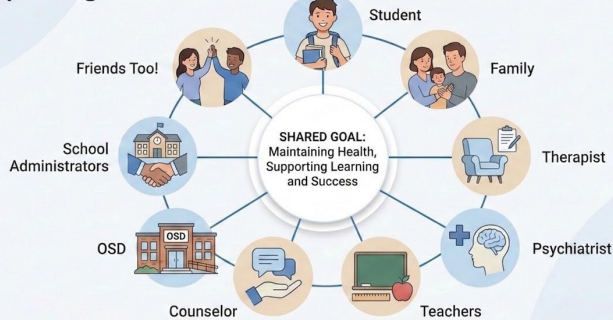
Cause racing thoughts, distractibility, irritability, and impulsive decisions.



Students are often working much harder than others realize. Compassion and support dramatically improve educational outcomes.

Share Functional Impacts to Build a Collaborative Partnership

Everyone Shares the Same Goal:
Supporting Student Success



"When disclosing a diagnosis, you do not have to share every clinical detail, trauma history, or full medical records. Focus on how the condition affects learning."

i What Schools Need

- **Functional impacts:** e.g., substantial impacts on concentration, sleep, and emotional regulation.
- Requested accommodations
- Required documentation

✓ The "Same Team" Mindset

- ✓ **Frame accommodations as access:** focus on removing learning barriers, not seeking an advantage.
- ✓ Assume positive intent and communicate early to support the student's education successfully.

Federal Protections Ensure Equal Access to Education

Students with bipolar disorder are protected under two major federal laws:

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

- Provides special education services and an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**.
- Bipolar disorder typically qualifies under the **"Other Health Impairment" (OHI)** category, as it is a chronic health condition limiting alertness, energy, and executive functioning.

Section 504 (Rehabilitation Act of 1973)

- Provides **equal access, accommodations, and protection** from discrimination.
- Designed for students who do not require specialized instruction but need a **level playing field**.

Comparing Support Pathways: 504 Plan vs. IEP

504 Plan

- Civil rights protection under Section 504.
- Provides accommodations (e.g., extended time, flexible deadlines).
- Student remains in general education.
- Less paperwork; no measurable annual goals required.

IEP

(Individualized Education Program)

- Special education law under IDEA.
- Provides accommodations **PLUS** specialized instruction and therapies.
- Extensive legal protections and procedural safeguards.
- Requires annual measurable goals and regular progress reporting.

Securing Actionable and Legally Binding Accommodations



Legal Context: Informal agreements with teachers are not legally enforceable and can disappear if staff changes. A written **504 Plan** or **IEP** creates consistency, accountability, and legal protection.

Academic

- ✓ Extended testing time
- ✓ Flexible deadlines during episodes
- ✓ Reduced homework during illness
- ✓ Recorded lectures

Environmental

- ✓ Testing in quiet spaces
- ✓ Priority scheduling
- ✓ Break passes

Behavioral/Health

- ✓ Modified attendance policies
- ✓ Ability to leave class to regulate emotions
- ✓ Excused mental health appointments

College Transitions Require Strong Self-Advocacy Skills

The Legal Landscape Shift

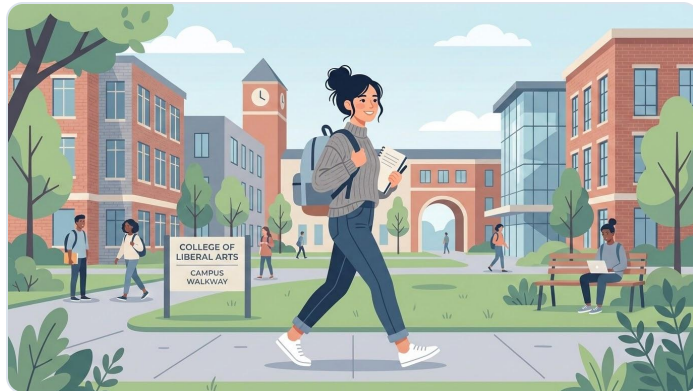
The legal landscape changes entirely in college. Parents generally do not manage accommodations.

FERPA & Privacy The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects educational privacy. Unless the student signs consent forms, parents cannot access grades, speak with professors, or manage accommodations.

Student Responsibilities Students must proactively register with disability services, request accommodations, and communicate with professors.

The same suggestions from earlier education still apply:

- Communicate early
- Registering with the office of student with disabilities apply
- School size is independent of quality of services through OSD



I Practice Self-Advocacy

Encourage students to practice saying:

"I'm struggling."

"I need to use my accommodations."

"I need an extension."

Final Takeaways: Prioritizing Wellness Over Perfection

Bipolar disorder changes the path, but it does not eliminate the destination. It does not define your student.

- ✓ **Partner with Schools:** Early communication helps build a strong support team.
- ✓ **Secure Legal Rights:** Accommodations provide necessary access, not an unfair advantage.
- ✓ **Build Independence:** Self-advocacy is a learned skill that takes practice.