

# How to Advocate Effectively for Yourself

*It wasn't until I realized that it was up to me to get my moods under control, that there was no magic cure that I began to turn the corner on the road to wellness.*

If you suffer from mood instability, you may feel as if you have lost control over your own life, and lost the ability and right to effectively advocate for yourself. It is also common for people with mood disorders to have very low self-esteem. The way to regain your sense of control and with it the hope and self-esteem necessary to stability and wellness is to successfully advocate for yourself.

In my studies, I have met many remarkable people who spent years completely debilitated by severe depression or manic depression and who have learned to be their own best advocate. They are now strong advocates for appropriate treatment and services for others. Many have become national leaders in the movement to get equal insurance coverage and other benefits for psychiatric disorders on par with the benefits available for other medical illnesses. You may have seen some of them testifying at the televised senate hearings. Others have taken leadership and supporting roles in a wide variety of fields.

*"Empowerment and recovery start from the inside when you begin to take charge of all the aspects of your life. People must always remember that there is hope*

---

## Ten Steps to Being an Effective Self-Advocate

### 1. Believe in Yourself

You are unique, valuable, and worth the effort it takes to advocate for yourself; your rights. You can do it! But you may need to work on raising your self-esteem so you can become your own best advocate.

Accurate assessment and self-acceptance are necessary first steps. Which statement best describes you?

I already believe in myself. I am going to continue the work of becoming my own best advocate.

I need to work on raising my self-esteem to become my own best advocate.

The following affirmation can also help. Try repeating it over and over again:

I am a unique and valuable person. I am worth the effort it takes to advocate for myself and protect my rights.

### 2. Know Your Rights

Everyone is entitled to equality under the law. Some people who have episodes of depression and manic depression erroneously believe that they do not have the same rights as others. I believed this for a while. I allowed people I did not know well and did not trust to make decisions for me and take control of my life. I now have systems in place so if I am not able to make good decisions for myself,

others will make them for me. You can do that, too, if you haven't done so.

You can start taking action by making a commitment to learn what your rights are.

/ am committed to learning what my rights are. I will contact my state agency of protection and advocacy to get this information. 1 will keep a file of my rights in my mental health file.

If you do not have systems in place for your treatment decisions, place a checkmark in following box and follow through by completing the treatment preference document at the rf this chapter.

I am committed to putting systems in place so that if I am not able to make good decisions for myself, others of my choice will make them for me.

### **3. Decide What You Want**

Clarify for yourself exactly what you need. This helps you set goals and be clear to others. Your needs may be in the area of treatment. This is often the first area where individuals experience in advocating for themselves. Perhaps you need to insist on a complete thyroid examination. Maybe you need to demand sick leave when you experience an episode of depression. Perhaps you need to contact your legislator about health care programs that do not treat depression and manic depression the same as other medical conditions.

### **4. Get the Facts**

When you advocate for yourself you need to be sure that your information is accurate For instance, when advocating for a complete thyroid test, go to your doctor's appointment armed with references such as Medical Mimics of Psychiatric Disorders. If advocating for sick leave when you are feeling depressed, contact your state agency of protection and advocacy, or your attorney, to find out what your rights are.

### **5. Strategize**

You'll always find it useful to write down what you think will work and the steps necessary to achieve your goals. Think of several ways to provide for the needs you've identified. Ask supporters for suggestions. Get feedback on your ideas. Then choose the one that feels right. Be sure to let the person or agency know how it helps them to help you.

### **6. Gather Support**

Work together with friends. Help each other and be mutually supportive. Nothing helps self-advocacy more than supportive friends. Join groups with common concerns. If necessary call your protection and advocacy organization for additional support. Keep track of by writing it down.

### **7. Target Your Efforts**

Ask yourself what person, persons, or organization can take action on the issue you've identified. Talk directly with the individual who can best assist you. It may take a few phone calls to discover which organization or person can help, or who is in charge, but it is worth the effort. Keep trying until you find the right person. Maybe the right person is your spouse or, family member.

### **8. Express Yourself Clearly**

Good communication skills are vital for effective self-advocacy. Learn to say directly what you mean. Be brief and stick to the point. Don't allow yourself to ramble on with unimportant details. State your concern and specify what you want. Good communication is a skill that does not receive the

attention it deserves in our educational institutions. If you feel you have a hard time communicating effectively, work on this with a counselor or supporter, read publications (ask your librarian for ideas), or take an adult education or community college^ on improving communication skills, public speaking, or take an adult education or community college class on improving communication skills, public speaking, or assertiveness training. Then practice these skills with supporters.

## **9. Assert Yourself Calmly**

If someone gives you a hard time, stay cool. Don't lose your temper and lash out at the other person, their character, or the organization. Instead, speak out, and listen. Respect the rights of others, but don't let them put you down or walk all over you.

Repeat these affirmations over and over until they are easy and comfortable for you:

When I advocate for myself, I am calm. I know this increases my effectiveness.

I speak out with ease and also respect the rights of others and listen to what they have to say.

When I advocate for myself, I am brief, clear, and to the point. I expect people to respect me.

## **10. Be Firm and Persistent**

Don't give up! Keep after what you want. Always follow through on what you say. Commit yourself to getting what you need for yourself.

Repeat the following affirmation to facilitate this process:

I am firm and persistent. I persist until I get what I need for myself.

## **Meeting in Person**

Speaking to someone in person is the most effective way to advocate for yourself. Make an appointment. Don't just show up. Here are some additional pointers:

1. Plan what you are going to say and the points you need to make. Practice with the help of friends, tape recorders, or mirrors if you feel unsure of yourself.
2. Dress neatly for the appointment. This gives the person the message that this is an important meeting.
3. Be on time. If you aren't respectful of someone's time, they may be less inclined to be receptive to your needs.
4. Look the person in the eye and shake hands firmly in greeting. Call the person by name. Use positive body language.
5. Tell them why it is in their best interest to respond to your request. Speak loudly enough to be heard without shouting.
6. State your message clearly and simply. Tell the person exactly what it is that you want.
7. Explain why you need it. Remember that how you say something often makes a greater impression than what you say.

8. Expect a positive response. Don't capitulate if you sense some initial resistance. Be firm.
9. Listen in a relaxed way to what the other person is saying. If you don't understand, ask questions for clarification. If you feel you are not getting anywhere, tell the other person that you wish to pursue your issues further and ask to speak to the person's supervisor.
10. At the end of the meeting, restate any action that has been decided upon so you both understand each other clearly. For instance, you might say, "As a result of this meeting, you are going to order a thyroid test for me." Or "As a result of this meeting I understand you are going to change my status to active." Thank the person for his or her time and assistance.
11. Send a follow-up note thanking them for meeting with you and summarizing any agreed upon action. It is a nice gesture. It also acts as a reminder and provides assurance that you both have the same understanding about the result of the meeting. Here's an example of a thank you note you might use:

Dear Ms. Gretsky:

Thank you for meeting with me last Wednesday morning. I appreciate your attention to my housing situation. I look forward to hearing from you next week, after you have contacted Mr. Stiglios.

Very sincerely, Jane Drew

## Getting Action through Letter Writing

Writing is a useful way to request information, present facts, express your opinion, or to ask for what you need. Make the letter short, simple, and clear. One page is best. Long letters may not be read, and it is likely that you'll have trouble sticking to the point.

I

It is acceptable to write the letter by hand if you don't have access to a typewriter or computer. Ask a supporter if it is clearly readable, understandable, and legible. Typing services are inexpensive and might be worth the cost.

If appropriate, send copies of your letter to others you want to inform such as your legislator or advocacy agency. Put "cc" (which means copies circulated) at the bottom of the letter with a list of others to whom you are sending copies.

Keep a copy of the letter in your file for future reference. It's a good idea to follow letter with a phone call to make sure the person got the letter and to discuss the situation.

## Advocating for Yourself by Phone

Letters and visits may be initiated or followed with phone calls if appropriate. The telephone is useful to gather information, to keep track of what's going on, and to let people know what you want. Before you call, write down the essential points of what you want to say.

When calling:

1. Identify yourself. Ask for the name and position of the person speaking with you
2. Briefly describe the situation and ask if they are the right person to handle your request. If they are not the right person, ask to be transferred to the appropriate person. If that person is not available, ask that they return your call. If you have not heard from them by the next day, call

back. Don't be put off or give up because your call is not returned. Keep calling until you reach the person who can help you.

3. Once you have reached the appropriate person, make your request for action brief and clear.
4. If the person cannot respond to your request immediately, ask when they will get back to you and the date on which you can expect action.
5. Thank the person for being helpful, if that's the case.
6. Send a thank you card. In cases when a person has been particularly helpful, this is a good idea, since it opens the door for further contact on related issues.
7. Keep a written record of your calls in your file. Include the date of your call, who you spoke to, issues addressed and promised action.
8. If you do not hear back from the person when expected, if the promised action is not taken or the situation is not resolved, call them back. Persist until you achieve your objectives.

## **Making Arrangements for Times When You Can't Make Decisions for Yourself**

Of course you hope that each episode of mood instability will be your last. Even with your best intentions and efforts, however, this may not be the case. While the episodes may get less frequent or lessen in intensity as you learn how to better manage them, they may continue to be an issue. That's why it's important to use that window of opportunity between episodes to develop a document that describes the care you want for yourself if you have another episode and are not capable of making your own decisions. When you are in the midst of a deep depressive episode or an out-of-control mania and you have not prepared in advance for this eventuality, the decisions made on your behalf may not be decisions you would make for yourself.

Like you, I hope I never have another severe episode of mania or depression. In mania, I do things that are damaging to my relationships, destroy my reputation, and cause me to take action contrary to my ethical and moral standards. Depressions are terribly painful and disabling. I am afraid that another deep depression might end in suicide. Therefore, I have developed a document to be used if my moods get out of control.

Before you develop your document, carefully research all treatment options, using the resources listed in this book. Include in your study information that expresses a variety of viewpoints. Discuss treatment options with your physician and other health care professionals. It is much easier to do this when you are well than when you are in the midst of an episode.

Don't expect your treatment plan to be like anyone else's. You are unique physiologically, respond differently than the next person, and have your own feelings about the appropriateness of specific treatments. You have the right to be treated as an individual who has unique needs and concerns. Be sure your document of treatment preference addresses the issues specifically of concern to you.

Also make sure that your document will hold up in court. Laws about such documents and their legality differ from state to state. Check with your attorney to see what kind of a document is legal in your state. Even if the document is not legal in your state, it will be a helpful guide to your chosen supporters.

## Hospitalization Rights

The rights of a person who is hospitalized, especially a person who is hospitalized against her will (this generally only happens if a person is a danger to himself or others), vary from state to state. Many people who suffer from mood disorders feel that they have been neglected, harshly or inappropriately treated in hospitals and that they have not received the same quality of care as people with other medical illnesses. Situations like these are wrong.

You have a right to expect the following, at the very least, in any health care facility.» copies of this list to supporters so they can advocate for you if you cannot advocate for yourself

You have the right to:

1. Communicate in person, by sending and receiving mail and by reasonable access to telephones, with the people of your choice.
2. Wear your own clothing.
3. Keep personal possessions, including toilet articles.
4. Practice religious freedom.
5. Use a private storage area to which you have free access.
6. Take care of personal hygiene needs in privacy.
7. Be furnished with a reasonable supply of writing materials and stamps.
8. Receive a written treatment plan that is updated as your condition or treatment changes.
9. Be represented by counsel whenever your rights may be affected.
10. Not be required to perform routine labor tasks of the facility except those essential for treatment.
11. Refuse any unusual or potentially hazardous treatment procedures.
12. Be accorded the same civil rights, respect, dignity, and compassion, and be treated the same manner and with the same effects, as a person not in such a facility.

## Resources

Copeland, M. (1992) *The Depression Workbook: A Guide for Living With Depression and Managing Depression*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. The self-help techniques in this book are helpful in raising self-esteem and learning self-advocacy.