

Bipolar Awakenings

Healing Retreat Handbook

2023

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Part 1

An Introduction to Our Retreat Program

Background

Since April of 2007, Sean Blackwell and his wife, transpersonal psychologist Ligia Splendore, have been developing a program to help people labeled with bipolar disorder heal. This project has involved:

- Continual research of the leading psychiatrists and psychologists in the field, such as Dr. Stanislav Grof, Dr. David Lukoff, Dr. John Weir Perry and Dr. Loren Mosher ([for a bibliography of our research, please click here](#)).
- Thousands of conversations with people struggling with bipolar disorder from all over the world.
- Voluntarily working with people in various non-ordinary experiences, including mania and “acute psychosis.”
- Professional education [with Grof Transpersonal Training](#) (GTT) as certified Holotropic Breathwork facilitators.

This experience has taken us to a place where we feel it is safe to work with people diagnosed with bipolar disorder in an emotionally supportive, protective retreat setting. We have conducted these private retreats in Brazil and abroad since November 2013. This document provides a brief description of the Bipolar Awakenings healing retreat program.

Underlying Assumptions

From the perspective of transpersonal psychologists such as Dr. Stanislav Grof, the root cause of bipolar disorder is not found in the biological brain but in an overflow of unconscious content which invades our conscious mind as a type of repressed bio-energetic material – something which is currently undetectable by science. We believe that this material is of a spiritual nature and is something found in everyone. The material itself is primarily composed of emotional content from life trauma. Still, it may also include traumatic events from perinatal experiences and energies from other more controversial dimensions of our existence, such as past lives.

In other words, a psychological crisis, even a “psychosis,” is an entirely natural phenomenon that can happen to anyone. There is nothing inherently pathological about it. And as a natural occurrence, we believe that all people with mental disorders at least have the *potential* to heal.

Retreat Goal

Our long-term objective is to help our clients heal to the point where they can remain medication-free without relapsing into mania, debilitating depression or psychosis. We do this by helping people to safely access the bio-energetic material, releasing it through powerful healing techniques. We hypothesize that the disorder will eventually resolve if enough of the bio-energetic material is removed.

This release process is somewhat unpredictable and, to some extent, out of our control. As with a woman giving birth, the doctor cannot create the birth of a baby, only make the birth process as safe as possible. In some ways, we see this as our role – to help facilitate the rebirth of our client into someone who is not only free of any mental disorder but also more open, peaceful, compassionate and alive.

A Private Location – In Your Country, or here in Brazil!

Our work is highly sensitive and must be done in a safe, emotionally supportive environment. Our clients must be able to focus on their own personal healing without the everyday stresses of work and family interfering. As a result, a very private location, preferably a home in the countryside, is required. At this location, our client should be able to make noise without alarming the neighbors. This location should also provide separate bedrooms for the client and the practitioner, as both parties require privacy and private time as part of the healing work.

During our time together, contact with friends and family that are not supportive of our efforts should be limited, as their opinions may cause undue stress, and their presence will be a distraction. In addition, although there will be plenty of time for visiting, children and pets should be cared for by other family members at a separate location.

If you are interested in working with us here in Brazil, we have an excellent small hotel in the countryside that fulfills our requirements.

The Need for Live Support

During the healing retreat, one person close to the client should always be available to provide emotional support. This “supporter” will stay with us at the house, where we will work with the healing techniques described below. Although additional help is always welcome, we will have time to cook and eat together and clean up after ourselves.

The role of the supporter is:

- (1) To witness the healing process so that someone in the regular life of the client can have a better understanding of what is involved.
- (2) To provide emotional support to the client as they work through what may be challenging emotional material.
- (3) To ensure that no inappropriate activities are taking place.
- (4) To be a great “listener” during and after the retreat to help the client integrate their experiences.
- (5) To keep the client company while the retreat facilitator gets extra rest or practices private meditation to prepare for the daily activities.

Healing Techniques

Listed below are the healing techniques we will use with our client. They vary in intensity. Everyone involved will agree upon the timing and duration of these techniques.

1. Our Primary Healing Technique: Bipolar Breathwork

Over the centuries, many breathing techniques have been developed in different parts of the world to induce spiritual states of consciousness and release painful emotional trauma.

However, we have found the practice of Holotropic Breathwork, created by Dr. Stanislav Grof, to be incredibly therapeutic. Holotropic Breathwork is a form of “over-breathing” that allows anyone to access and release the bio-energetic material mentioned above. It has been used to heal depression, birth trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and has cured people of alcoholism and other addictions.

Because most people have limited access to their unconscious, a typical Holotropic Breathwork session is quite intense, lasting up to three hours. Powerful music is also played loudly to help

encourage people to push themselves into contact with the unconscious dimension. However, in our opinion, the bio-energetic content of a person with bipolar disorder is more sensitive and usually easier to access.

As a result, we agree with Grof Transpersonal Training that the standard format for Holotropic Breathwork which typically involves a three-hour group session is not a suitable healing setting for most people with bipolar disorder. Most Holotropic Breathwork facilitators will not accept someone with bipolar disorder into their breathwork workshops as they realize the potential risks.

However, with a slightly modified approach that is in complete accordance with all of the fundamental principles of Holotropic Breathwork, we can use this technique in a way that is both gentle and deeply healing. Our **Bipolar Breathwork** sessions usually take 30 to 120 minutes, depending on how our client feels. As opposed to the group setting, in our private sessions, the client will have the undivided attention of both the supporter and a certified Holotropic Breathwork facilitator, Sean Blackwell. Music can also be more personalized, depending on the client's emotional state. Used in this way, Bipolar Breathwork is a powerful technique that can be used almost every day of the retreat.

Materials: (1) Some space on the floor for the client to lie down. (2) A few yoga mats or thin mattresses to lie on. (3) Pillows and blankets for comfort and protection. (4) Powerful speakers can be connected to a laptop to play MP4 audio tracks.

[It should be noted that Grof Transpersonal Training currently endorses Bipolar Breathwork. Sean received his certification as a Holotropic Breathwork facilitator in September 2016.]

2. **Vipassana meditation** is a technique that we will all use, including the supporters. This form of meditation (1) helps to create a sacred bond between us as we work together; (2) helps the client get in touch with their bodily sensations, which prepares them for bipolar breathwork; (3) is a practice that can be used daily once the retreat is over to help with integration. We are expected to meditate together almost daily for 30 – 60 minutes.

Materials required: A quiet room and some pillows to help people get comfortable while they meditate.

3. **Mandala Drawing**

The drawing of mandalas for artistic self-expression helps to integrate the experiences which arise from our unconscious. As a result, mandala drawings are usually done after every breathwork session and at other important moments of the healing program. No special artistic talent is necessary.

Materials: Large art-size pages. Crayons or pastels.

4. **Bodywork / Body Contact**

As the bio-energetic material is released, parts of the body may feel intense sensations such as cramping, pain, heat, cold, itching, tingling, etc. Sensations such as these should be respected as part of the healing process. As a result, the client is encouraged to stretch or contract in whatever way feels right for them, especially during breathwork.

Occasionally, the client may want to feel the pressure of physical contact or simply touching a specific part of the body. This contact can help to facilitate the release of trapped energy. In addition, especially during more intense moments, people may request to be warmly embraced to express or receive feelings of love.

Dr. Grof points out that while physical contact with the therapist (or supporter) could be considered illegal in parts of The United States and other countries, due to the risk of sexual abuse, sharing physical contact, when requested by the patient, can be an essential part of the healing process. A supporter should be present during any therapeutic exercise to ensure that nothing inappropriate occurs. Sexual contact between supporters and the person taking the retreat represents a severe breach of trust, even if initiated by the patient.

5. **Counseling**

As the more profound therapeutic techniques begin to release the unconscious bio-energetic material, the client may wish to share their newfound issues and insights through conversation. At this point, our retreat work may look more like an informal “talk therapy” session. One crucial difference, however, is that on our retreat, there is no time restriction to the conversation – we talk until the subject reaches its natural completion.

While it sounds unconventional, on occasion, we have found it very beneficial to create new, client-specific approaches which bring a combination of all of the above into one fluid healing experience – breathwork, meditation, mandala drawing, bodywork and counseling, all happening in a seamless flow!

Integration

Integration is a critical part of the healing process, as the inner transformation eventually needs to manifest itself in the client’s daily life and relationships. However, this change should not be rushed and will manifest when the time is right, perhaps weeks or months after the retreat is complete. As a result, our clients need to continue with the integration aspect of their healing through regular meetings with an empathetic therapist who supports our healing program. Follow-up integration sessions with Sean or Ligia can also be online for a reasonable fee.

Timeline

After working with people in the retreat format for several years, we realized that ten days is enough time to get the most out of what this program offers. Regardless of its length, the last 20% of our time together should be reserved as an integration period, where our client simply has time to relax and share their unfolding experiences with us in a protective setting. No work in non-ordinary states would happen during this critical integration time.

Medications

The healing retreat can be done with medicated or unmedicated clients. For example, transpersonal psychiatrist Dr. James Eyerman conducted over 11,000 sessions of Holotropic Breathwork with patients at Washington University Psychiatric Hospital in St. Louis, over 12 years, without any reported adverse reactions due to medication. One added benefit is that by working with clients while they are medicated, we reduce any tension from family members and healthcare professionals who may be unsupportive towards a program that eliminates medications.

If the client feels that they could benefit from a reduction in medication at some point after the retreat, it should be discussed with their family and psychiatrist.

Pricing

The total cost will depend on the location and accommodation arranged. Sean Blackwell’s fee is USD \$500 USD per day for retreats held in Brazil, \$600 USD in other countries.

Next Steps

If you are interested in learning more about our healing retreat, please schedule an online consultation using the booking form on the website homepage.

Thank you for your interest!

Sean Blackwell

BipolarAwakenings.com

Part 2

Complete our Online Questionnaire

We believe that each person arrives at a psychological crisis due to their life path and background. Genetic inheritance plays a minor role if any. Based on years of conversations with people diagnosed with bipolar disorder, we have identified a series of criteria that we believe would characterize someone with a high probability of benefiting from our program. While we remain open to considering any candidate, it is crucial to consider the background and disposition of each client to ensure that our retreat program is a sound investment for them.

As a result, we ask that each potential client [click here](#) to complete the following questionnaire, which will be discussed afterward during a consultation.

Part 3

Frequently Asked Questions

Will my disorder be completely healed after I finish one retreat?

Our experience has shown us that a ten-day healing retreat can benefit people with bipolar disorder and other related disorders tremendously. In some cases, emotional issues, which may have plagued someone for years, can be released in minutes. In addition, many clients report that their first retreat led to noticeable, lasting improvement.

However, with that said, most people have accumulated the trauma and emotional repression associated with their disorder over many decades, so it may be unrealistic to expect total healing to take place in just one retreat. Because healing takes time, additional retreats will most likely be necessary for a complete resolution of the disorder.

May I stop my medications after the retreat?

In almost every retreat, the amount of repressed bio-energetic material released has been quite dramatic. In some cases, long-held traumas or physical pain has disappeared within a few days of using our techniques. As a result, the retreat process can leave people feeling transformed, perhaps entirely healed. However, most clients leave the retreat exhausted at the very least, as our deep inner work often demands extra sleep.

Initially, such powerful transformations led our clients to experiment with reducing medication quite quickly. Some went entirely off their medications within a few months. Unfortunately, while a few have had success with this approach, some of our other clients went on to have manic episodes. The reason appears to be two-fold. First, there was more bio-energetic material to work through. Second, due to the retreat work, the client's bio-energetic, or kundalini system, may have been more "open," allowing for a greater flow of repressed material to surface even weeks after the retreat. In this way, ***the subsequent manic episodes may have played a role in the healing process.*** With that said, manic episodes are certainly not the ideal way anyone wants to heal due to the damage they cause to our lives.

As a result, starting in 2017, we adopted a new policy regarding medications, which, ironically, brings us even more in line with our integrated approach of respecting the role of psychiatry in your process:

Regardless of the perceived progress made during the retreat, we ask that the client stays on their prescribed medication dosage for a minimum of one month after the retreat has been completed. After this period, any reduction in medication should be done only if you feel "over-medicated", and only under psychiatric supervision.

While this policy may seem very simple, it is, in fact, based on a newfound insight:

As our retreat work progresses, you will have less bio-energetic material to process than you did previously. As a result, the medication dosage you require to remain grounded will eventually become more negligible. When that happens, you should begin to have the symptoms of being overmedicated – feeling continually drowsy, dull, lacking energy and perhaps depressed. As I mentioned above, feeling tired immediately after the retreat should be expected. However, if those symptoms persist for more than two weeks, then there is a legitimate reason for you to talk to your psychiatrist about a reduction in your medications.

What are the risks?

Anytime we take an unknown path, certain risks are involved. Especially when discussing new approaches to healing the mind, those risks must be carefully considered. When we started our healing retreat in 2013, we were cautious regarding the risk of one of our clients entering into a state of mania or “psychosis,” which might have required hospitalization. However, our initial experience and the work of [Dr. James Eyerman](#) have led us to believe that our approach is safe for most people. Perhaps most reassuring is that, among the 11,000 sessions of Holotropic Breathwork conducted by Dr. Eyerman with psychiatric patients, not one episode of psychosis was reported. **Having completed over 50 retreats, we have not had a single client enter a period of psychosis during the retreat.**

Nevertheless, in the case of an acute psychosis or manic episode occurring, hospitalization may be required under the following circumstances:

1. If the client becomes violent towards themselves or others,
2. If the client enters into a continual state of denial (or paranoia) regarding what is happening to him or her, refusing support,
3. If the client leaves the house property and refuses to return,
4. If the facilitator and support team cannot continue in their role, and the client remains in an unstable non-ordinary state.

What about treating people with other disorders?

As we believe that all mental disorders that lack clear biological origins have bio-energetic roots, we also think that our retreat program can help people with a wide variety of mental disorders. However, with that said, we have had minimal experience working with people with other conditions, so there may be a learning curve for us in the best way to work with someone, depending on the specific characteristics of the disorder itself.

What is Sean Blackwell’s role on the retreat?

Before the retreat begins, it’s essential to be clear about my role as the retreat facilitator - how I can or cannot help you. As you have seen in the video [“A New Approach to Bipolar Disorder,”](#) this retreat takes what is helpful from four different ways of looking at your condition: Psychiatry, Psychology, The Peer Support Movement and Shamanism, bringing them together into one integrated program. Looking at these four approaches provides a clearer understanding of my role as retreat facilitator:

1. From Psychiatry – respect for your doctor

This retreat process brings respect for psychiatry and the role psychiatric medications have played in helping you function daily. As a result, I will not offer any advice regarding changes to your prescription. **It is part of the client agreement that you come to the retreat on your usual medication dosages.** Remaining on your meds is especially important for those flying to Brazil, as international travel can trigger non-ordinary state experiences. Our experience indicates that our healing techniques remain effective, provided that you are not over-medicated.

2. From Psychology – the role of ‘talk’ therapist

As the producer of the Bipolar Awakenings video series, I have a deep theoretical understanding of transpersonal psychology and many years of experience in talking with people around the world diagnosed with bipolar and other related disorders. As a result, I can provide you with unique insight related to whatever may arise during your healing program that you may want to discuss. The ‘talk therapy’ aspect of the retreat is a fundamental part of the healing process.

3. **From the Peer Support Movement – the role of peer**

It's important to remember that I was hospitalized for "acute psychosis" in 1996. As a result, I always consider myself as a *peer first* – someone who has been in your situation. We won't have a cold, doctor–patient relationship where something is done to you to fix your problem. As a peer, my role is emotionally supportive in nature. To get the most out of your retreat, a close relationship between everyone involved is essential.

4. **From Shamanism – the role of shaman (with a small 's')**

Some people have come to me thinking that I am some kind of guru with magical powers that will make all of their problems disappear – big mistake! If your retreat is to be successful, it will most likely take you into some painful situations that you will need to face. **Therefore, you should arrive at the retreat expecting your entire healing process to occur within you – this is what you are paying for.**

With that said, ***we have noticed in every retreat to date a large amount of bio-energetic material appears to be transferred from the client to me, Sean Blackwell.*** In a sense, ***the Inner Healer is more like a Healing Field***, which can transfer traumatic energies from the client to support people who are very empathetic. This process benefits the clients, as they are not taxed with the burden of working through the more challenging parts of their process, making the healing path faster and easier.

However, as myself and perhaps other support staff may be absorbing difficult energies, we will need to "Clear-Out" these energies ourselves. As a result, each day of breathwork will include "Clear-Out" sessions for me and perhaps other supporters as we attempt to process as much of the client's energies as efficiently as possible.

Needless to say, this highly shamanic process is quite radical and represents a significant evolutionary step in the development of the breathwork process. Further explanation of this "Clear-Out" process can be done during pre-retreat consultations.

Part-therapist, part-peer and part-shaman – these roles I will fulfill as your retreat facilitator.

What is Ligia Splendore's role?

At this point in the development of our program, Ligia's primary focus is as a transpersonal psychologist in São Paulo, with a weekly agenda of clients, many of whom have bipolar disorder. As a result, her availability for participation in our retreats is somewhat limited. With that said, her years of experience as a 'talk therapist' can be beneficial, especially when the client is trying to integrate their retreat process.

To take advantage of Ligia's strengths as a transpersonal psychologist, we offer each client a free one-hour consultation with Ligia via Skype before each retreat. Then, once the retreat is over, three free consultations are provided during the first six weeks of integration.

If the client wishes to continue having Skype consultations with Ligia after these consultations, a fee of \$100 per session will be charged. However, if we feel that Ligia's contribution would be very beneficial to the client, her participation can be arranged for a reasonable fee.

What exactly am I paying for?

Some clients have expressed confusion related to what they are paying for during this retreat, so it is essential to clarify the following:

1. **You are not paying for a specific number of hours with bipolar breathwork, vipassana meditation, counseling, or any other healing technique.**

A few clients with a more materialist perspective have come to our retreat with a “time is money” attitude to their healing, wanting to jam in as many hours of healing techniques into a day as possible. Unfortunately for them, trying to “get your money’s worth” out of the retreat is not the ideal approach for people looking to heal safely. The Healing Path is not as direct as some people would like.

The optimal approach towards your healing path is to respect the “flow” of our time together, recognizing intuitively when it’s the right time to work, rest or play. On the one hand, we have conducted retreats where our clients have done as much as twenty hours of bipolar breathwork over ten days – a very intensive program. On the other hand, we’ve had others who have found it best to progress at a much more casual pace.

Sometimes the healing path becomes entirely out of our control. For example, one client’s healing program ended with three consecutive days of vomiting. Adding additional techniques to his ‘volcanic’ activity was not only unnecessary, but also utterly impossible, as he was physically exhausted from the turmoil his body was going through.

Rest also plays an important role, not only for the client but for the facilitator and supporter(s), due to the physiological impact of the bio-energetic release. The cause seems to be related to the amount of energy exchange that happens between the client and the supporter(s).

For example, it is common for me to require extra sleep after a particularly intense breathwork session. In other words, the more energy released, the more tired the people involved may be afterward. So please remember that sleeping during the day should not be seen as a sign of failure or laziness but of progress. If you are so exhausted that your body requires extra hours of sleep, then chances are a profound transformation has taken place.

2. **You are not paying for specific, predetermined results.**

Each person coming to this retreat is unique. Some have milder disorders, while others are more difficult. Some clients are capable of confronting painful issues quickly. Others need more time to build trust with the process, moving at their own pace. As a result, the amount of healing that takes place is highly unpredictable and impossible to measure.

Integration can also have an unpredictable flow. Confronting painful feelings can be liberating but disturbing. Some people may leave the retreat with an undeniable sparkle in their eyes, while others may feel vulnerable and moody. The clearing of energy blockages can lead to the resurfacing of buried memories weeks after the retreat!

As the retreat facilitator, I cannot guarantee results with which you will be satisfied. All I can do is guide and support your healing process as best I can and trust the Healing Field to do its job.

3. **You are paying to participate in a potentially powerful healing process facilitated by me, Sean Blackwell.**

That means that you are paying for my time as the retreat facilitator. In this role, I will work with you to provide you with the most powerful healing process you can handle. Your program will, most likely, have an average of six or seven therapeutic hours per day, either in counseling,

bipolar breathwork, meditation or some other exercise. The rest of your time will be for meals, sleep and leisure. As the retreat approaches its end, integration becomes the priority. Less time will be spent in therapy, and more time will be focused on counseling, rest and leisure activities.

Can more than one person take the retreat at a time?

While working with one client has been the norm, I have experimented with working with more than one client at a time. If there is a situation where I feel that there are two clients who would be compatible, I am open to considering the possibility of a paired retreat. Fees would naturally need to be adjusted, depending on the retreat arrangement.

Can one of my parents act as a supporter or supervisor?

It is usually not recommended. Often, issues arise between the client and parent(s) during the sessions, which can lead to counterproductive conflicts. It is better to have a supportive friend or sibling who has a bit more of an emotional distance from you. Only if you have a very positive relationship with your parent and you have no other option should we consider a parent in the role of supporter.

In addition, parents may wish to participate in a supervisory role, which is not allowed. Having a friend or other family member participate as a supporter is sufficient for your protection. Bringing in anyone skeptical of this work or my intentions is toxic to the retreat environment and your healing process. We all need to be mentally, emotionally and spiritually on the same page.

What is the schedule?

The agenda of each day will largely be determined by you, the client, listening to your intuitive choice regarding how you wish to proceed with your healing process. However, with that said, a typical day on our retreat may look something like this:

9:00 am – 10:00 am	Breakfast
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Bipolar Breathwork #1
12:00 pm – 12:30 pm	Mandala Drawing
12:30 pm – 1:30 pm	Lunch (in Brazil, lunch is the main meal of the day)
1:30 pm – 2:30 pm	Break
2:30 pm – 4:30 pm	“Clear-Out” Breathwork session for Sean or another supporter.
4:30 pm – 5:00 pm	Break
5:00 pm – 6:30 pm	Bipolar Breathwork #2
6:30 pm – 7:30 pm	Dinner (light sandwiches)
7:30 pm – 9:00 pm	Sharing of Breathwork experience and mandala drawings
9:00 pm – 10:00 pm	Vipassana Meditation
10:00 pm	Bed: Lots of sleep is important as it helps the integration process and gives your support team the rest they need.

As we see how your retreat unfolds, most evenings, we will agree on the best way forward on the following day.

Will my experiences with Bipolar Breathwork be similar to Moni K’s?

My client, Monika Kettler, has done an excellent job of promoting her story of healing through her article at [Mad in America](#) as well as a [video series](#) that provides great detail into her non-ordinary experiences while doing Bipolar Breathwork under my facilitation. Inspired by Moni’s healing process, other clients have come to their retreat expecting similar non-ordinary experiences.

However, our experience suggests that many clients will have non-ordinary experiences that are quite different from Moni's. Some clients begin their retreat process with experiences that are very vibrational in nature. They spend a lot of time shaking, twitching, or vibrating. When they return from their process, they often report feeling rested but cannot recall any vision, feeling or memory related to their vibrational behavior. It's common for them to feel that their breathwork session lasted only a few minutes rather than the actual two or three hours.

Another common experience is for clients to become very still in what is called a "shamanic sleep." The experience mirrors sleep but seems to take place in a very peaceful and relaxing dimension, even though loud drumming is blasting in the room! It can seem quite mysterious to the supporters to see someone appear to fall asleep after just a few minutes of hard breathing. Nevertheless, it is a frequent occurrence.

Sometimes people have felt disappointed by having experiences that they feel are not as powerful as what they would have imagined through Moni's videos. However, we have come to realize that the Healing Field provides people with the healing experience they are prepared to handle. If a powerful visual experience is not coming to you, chances are that the repressed memories related to those energies are so traumatic that you would find them very upsetting. So if your Bipolar Breathwork session seems relaxing and mild, consider it a blessing!

Is there anything I should study to help me prepare for the retreat?

Along with a review of all playlist videos, which are available [on my website](#), it would be beneficial to read the following materials:

[Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-Exploration and Therapy, by Stanislav Grof](#)

[Am I Bipolar or Waking Up?, by Sean Blackwell](#)

[A Clinical Report of Holotropic Breathwork in 11,000 Psychiatric Inpatients in a Community Hospital Setting, by Dr. James Eyerman](#)

For those interested in deepening your understanding of this subject, please download my [Bibliography](#), which includes all books and research that have been a part of the Bipolar Awakenings project.

More Questions?

If you are interested in learning more about our healing retreat, please contact me, Sean Blackwell, at bipolarawakenings@gmail.com. Once we are in touch, we can schedule a consultation to cover additional details.

I hope you can join us!

Sean Blackwell

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<http://www.bipolarawakenings.com/>