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218 — Living with Bipolar Disorder Featuring Emmy-Winning Actor Maurice Benard

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength. Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to this show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let's dive into today's episode!

You've likely heard of bipolar disorder, but how well do you actually understand it? Bipolar is probably one of the most commonly misunderstood conditions, and it's really no wonder why. There are different types of bipolar. The symptoms can vary greatly too. Sometimes people who have manic episodes exhibit psychosis. At other times, people experience a deep depression that makes it hard to get out of bed for months at a time. It's estimated that somewhere around 4% of people in the United States have bipolar disorder. So there's a good chance that you might know someone who has it. Learning more about it can help you have a better understanding.
Here today to talk more about bipolar disorder is Maurice Benard, who plays the popular character Sonny Corinthos on General Hospital. He's a fierce advocate for mental health. He wrote a book called Nothing General About It where he shares how the illness has affected him and how he's gotten treatment for it. He also started a mental health YouTube show called State of Mind. Some of the things he talks about today are how he got honest about sharing his struggles with people, the strategies that help him get through his darkest times, and how he came to accept his illness.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist’s Take. It's the part of the show where I'll break down Maurice's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. So here's Maurice Benard on how he copes with bipolar disorder.

Amy Morin:
Maurice Benard, welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

Maurice Benard:
Thank you very much, Amy.

Amy Morin:
I'm excited to talk to you. My grandmother was a huge General Hospital fan. For years, she taped every episode on VHS tape. I lived with her during college for a while and got caught up on General Hospital. We'd sit down, and she would explain to me what I had missed over the last 20 years of not watching General Hospital, and Sonny and Carly and Brenda and the whole nine yards. So I have very fond memories of watching your show and seeing you evolve as Sonny over the years.

But what I didn't know was that you were battling bipolar in your personal life too. I know we made Sonny's character have bipolar, and the show has done a great job depicting that. But I had no idea that you were also battling that in your personal life.

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, I started the show... Two years before I got General Hospital, I went through a very rough period of trying to get jobs and running out of money and borrowing money
and a lot of pressure which built. zit starts building and building and building, and you think that you're fine, but you're not.

So when I started General Hospital, two, three weeks into the gig, I had my third nervous breakdown. I quit the show. They could've fired me because they didn't know. I wasn't popular or anything. I was just an actor came on. A lot of stuff went down. If you read the book, Nothing General About It, you know what happened.

I went back to work. The hardest thing was to go back to... I couldn't remember a line, and I said to the producer, we were in my room, and I was crying, and she said, "We'll take it page by page or word by word if we have to." So I went upstairs, did the scenes - big scenes, man - because I had been out for a while. I had to do a lot of scenes. It was not great, but I did it. And every day got a little better.

Amy Morin:

I think bipolar might be one of, maybe the most misunderstood mental health issue. I'm a therapist, and I see lots of people who come into my office with huge misconceptions about what bipolar is. So maybe we should start there. What do you think some of the biggest misconceptions are that people have about bipolar?

Maurice Benard:

Well, I think the misconceptions are that somebody’s just acting crazy, and they’re going to get over it. But I can only speak from my own experience. If I'm going through a mania, and I don't get help, professional help, I know the crash is going to be difficult. There are a lot of people out there who like that mania, who think that they don't want to take medication because it affects their creativity, and maybe their crash isn't as bad, because that's what I hear. Some are worse than others. Mine was so bad, thank God, that I don't want the mania because that crash... I went eight months of depression, which was horrific.

Amy Morin:

Yeah., I think sometimes people will confuse bipolar with so many other things, and I'll hear people say it in my office. Somebody's moody. They're like, "Oh, that person must
have bipolar." And we know it often gets misdiagnosed. It has a lot of characteristics of other things, ADHD, schizophrenia, anxiety, and major depression. A lot of people just get diagnosed with depression. But then we know, when we put people who have bipolar on antidepressants, it often sends them into a manic phase, and life gets worse. How long did it take for you to get diagnosed correctly with bipolar disorder?

Maurice Benard:

Well, I was in a mental institution at 21. Had my birthday in there, and I was 22. I was in there for two and a half weeks, and then I escaped. They couldn't tell me what I had. That's all I wanted to know. "What do I have? What is this?" "We don't know."

After I escaped from the mental institution, I went to a psychiatrist named... I forgot his name, I forgot. Great, great guy. Nguyen, Charles Nguyen. He just sat there, and he just wrote down and looked at me, listened to me talk, and wrote. And at the end he said, "You're manic depressive." I said, "What is that?" He says, "It's a chemical imbalance. You're going to be okay. You just have to take some lithium." And that was the first time I heard, which made me feel good, because at least I knew that I had something.

Amy Morin:

But you say in your book though, getting a diagnosis is tough. But then accepting it is even tougher.

Maurice Benard:

To me, there is times when it was difficult to accept, because then you have to accept that you failed, which I didn't fail. It's just an obstacle. But in my mind, now I'm this thing, manic depression, manic depressive. And I just started my career, and I end up in a mental institution. So now, I've failed.

I've had this conversation today about my main thing was worrying about what people think. And I think that causes a lot of problems. But that's the way I was brought up, and I had that forever. I've only started not feeling that way in my head about a year ago.

Amy Morin:
Really?

Maurice Benard:

Yeah. Things start to compute. Just stay in the moment. The narrative in your head, don't listen to that. And I think doing State of Mind, just talking to people every week, because I got to admit I don't see a psychiatrist. But I haven't felt this good, and it's not mania. Trust me. I haven't felt this good in ever, ever. And a lot of it has to do with not to worry about what people think.

Amy Morin:

I know during the pandemic is when you started State of Mind. And it wasn't because you were in an awesome state of mind, but you started showing people some of your real struggles.

Maurice Benard:

Yeah. This is not in my book because my book came after this. It was one day, and my mom and dad had moved out of my home. My dad made a phone call to me about something. Went to my bed. My wife comes in and says, "You can't promote the book in New York anymore because of this pandemic." And in my head, the pandemic was the end of the world. And she says, "We're shutting down. They're shutting down General Hospital."

I felt this cold rush all in my body. And that night, this had never happened, even with my three nervous breakdowns. I started getting this anxiety, and I started to shake all over. That made me go even worse, because I'm thinking, "This has never happened. And now, I'm done here. I don't know what's going on." My wife would try to say, "Honey, it's okay." I said, "It's not okay, honey. I'm shaking. My whole body's shaking. What is this?"

Then I had to promote the book doing Zooms, wanting to kill myself 24 hours a day for four months. I promoted the book for about two months. These people, Charlamagne tha God, Dr. Drew, Dr. Oz, they didn't know that what I really wanted to say to them was, "Can you save me, man, because I'm dying here?"
Amy Morin:
Wow.

Maurice Benard:
And I would just talk about mental health. I got anxiety, and I would sneak in. I'm not really sleeping. Anything you can save. They don't know what's going on. But in the big picture, I think the pandemic helped the book, because I think it's sold more because there was a pandemic, and my book's about that, about mental health.

It was interesting when I got the call that it was New York Times bestseller, the publishing company, HarperCollins, were all excited and everything. They told me this, and I had nothing. I was numb.

I could never celebrate because it was the pandemic. But I did go outside, and I started cry a little bit. I told my family, and that was it. It was nothing. But I couldn't enjoy that feeling because of the way I was feeling. Eventually, thank God, I got professional help.

Amy Morin:
What kind of help did you get?

Maurice Benard:
Well, I went to the psychiatrist, because if you could imagine, I couldn't get help for four months, three and a half months, three months, let's say. I couldn't get a psychiatrist because of the pandemic. But you would think somebody who's done what I've done for mental health could. No.

Finally, I found this guy. He was a bit of a, I don't want to say. He was unusual, but I liked him, and we connected. He said, "I'm going to put you on Lexapro." All right. But he always, when he talked to me, always was nervous whether I was having a manic episode or not. And I would say to him, "Listen, I don't think I'm God right now. This is not a manic episode. I've just got this anxiety that's going to kill me." The Lexapro worked. Went back to work at General Hospital, did an Alzheimer's storyline, and won an Emmy, two Emmys, actually, after that.
Amy Morin:
Well, congratulations.

Maurice Benard:
Thank you.

Amy Morin:
How difficult was it for you to, I guess in the first place, when you started taking lithium back in the day, how difficult was it for you to take medication and then stay on your medication?

Maurice Benard:
Not good. I was bad in the beginning. I was bad. First, I started taking lithium, got better. Then a year later, no, maybe nine months later, got off at the end because I felt good. And then about four months later, I had another nervous breakdown. Aw, God and the related.
The last time, before I started GH, I had stopped medication for two years. Not good, not good. I didn't have a breakdown, but it was building. It was building because I wasn't taking medication. Now, listen, people, stay on it. I've been taking lithium for 29 years straight. Not a nervous breakdown. That's the reality of it.

Amy Morin:
Wow.

Maurice Benard:
I got a friend who questions that a bit, and he's like, "Well, you could probably do it without it." I said, "Listen, two nervous breakdowns, got off my medication. On my medication 29 years, no nervous breakdown. I think that's proof."

Amy Morin:
When you say nervous breakdown, is that the same thing as a manic episode or...?
Maurice Benard:

Yeah, I call it, because that's what I called it in the beginning. To me, I don't know what would be worse. Maybe a nervous breakdown is worse than a manic episode. I don't know. I think it's similar.

Amy Morin:

What would happen to you when you went would get manic?

Maurice Benard:

I would be three times smarter. I could literally... One time, I was with my buddy, who's passed away, and I was sitting there in front of him. This was the beginning of my first nervous breakdown, manic episode. I said, "I can read your mind." He goes, "Come on, man." I said, "Think of something. Is it this?" He's like, "Yeah." I said, "Think of something else. Is it this?" He goes, "Dude, you're scaring me." He ran into the bedroom. Because when I get manic, everything heighten, heighten, heightens. You get this rush of feeling like God.

In one of my manic episodes, it's in my book, I threatened to kill my wife and her nieces. And I was drunk also. But that's what happens now. I was on Oprah talking about it, and Oprah said to my wife, "Did you think he was going to kill you?" My wife said, "I didn't know." But I know, even now, that at that moment, I was just playing games. I was not going to do anything. But whoever loves you, that's in front of you, doesn't know that. You scare the hell out of them.

Amy Morin:

How do you become aware that you're manic, when you're manic? Or do you?

Maurice Benard:

That's a great question. I would hope now that I'm my almost 60 years old, that I would know the trigger. But early on, it just creeps up and grabs you, and then you deny. "Fine, fine. No, I'm good. What are you talking about? Bah, bah, bah, bah."
I think now, if you’re not sleeping, if you’re starting to feel... A lot of, for me, with anxiety, a lot of that is pressure. So what I've done is I've eliminated the pressure so it doesn't happen, whereas before, I would just allow pressure to come, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah. And then it would just take me. But now, I'm trying... Even here when this thing wasn't working, if this were two years ago, I'd have been a wreck. And then I'd come on your show being like, "I'm sorry," whereas now, I just stay calm.

Amy Morin:
Right. Interesting. How long do your manic phases typically last?

Maurice Benard:
Well, for me, they'd last a week or two. And then I'd go through depression. The depression was depression where you don't want to get out of bed, nothing feels good. I used to roll out of bed, roll out, fall down. It's terrible. But I haven't had depression in a long time. Just anxiety. That's the Freddy Krueger, the anxiety where Freddy's up there sometimes. He's like, "I'm going to get you." And I'm like, "No, you don't." Most of the time, he doesn't. But a lot of times he has.

Amy Morin:
When you would be in a depressed state, how long would that last?

Maurice Benard:
Oh, boy. It could last one... I'll tell you a story that I usually you don't like talking about, but... I did a movie that we produced, and 500 people came to the premiere. I literally thought 500 people hated it. So I went into a depression. It lasted three weeks. I had to get professional help, just because of I cared what people thought. That's what I'm talking about. But the depression after I escaped the hospital lasted eight months.

Amy Morin:
Wow.

Maurice Benard:
I used to get up and curse God. "Why? Why are you doing this? Why are you making me feel this pain, man? I don't get it. I don't get it."

Amy Morin:
And for people who haven't read your book, when you talk about depression, you're not just talking about a little mild nagging depression. You're talking at times about fairly debilitating depression that made it difficult, if not impossible, to even get out of bed.

Maurice Benard:
Yeah. It seems like it's not going to end. But what I want people to know, every time I do a State of Mind, I always let people know how horrible it is and that you can get through it. That's the message. If I'm still here, it's because I've been able to go through a nightmare in hell and come out of it and see the light every time. But when you're in it, I understand. You don't think you can.

My wife would say to me, and I say it all the time, but it's very cool, I'd say, "Baby." I'd come in, crying. I'd say, "Baby, I can't go on. Can't do it." She'd say, "Honey, you are stronger than you know. You just got to push." And she's been right.

Amy Morin:
I love that she said that to you, and it's true. But depression will tell you, "Things are never going to get any better. They're only going to get worse. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. And you can't get through today." And it's hard to keep working through that when you believe it in that moment.

Maurice Benard:
Exactly. Well, we've been talking about it how many times that I've been through things, and I get out, I come out it. And then what happens? During the pandemic, I was as close to taking my life as I've ever been. Not just once, every morning, because I visualized how. And I think that's the next step and then...

But I got through it. And guess what has happened since I got through it? I've gone back to work. I won two Emmys, I started State of Mind on YouTube. I interview people every
fricking week on mental health or whatever. Can you imagine? I wouldn't be here, and all that stuff wouldn't have... So that's the thing.

But I do say this. It's not as easy as getting through it. You have to take the right road. For instance, if you're drinking alcohol, and you get through it, and then you keep on drinking, you make it worse. But if you stop the drinking, and you do what needs to be done, your life will be better. I promise you that. I promise you that.

Amy Morin:
Thank you for saying that, because I think sometimes people want a cure that makes things better right now. And sometimes things feel like they're going to get a little bit worse before they get better. Somebody who gives up an addiction is going to feel worse for a while, until they work through it. Or when you first start taking a new medication, you probably aren't going to feel great the first day. It may take a while before you feel better. But you have to hang in there with the faith of, "If I keep doing this, I might feel better at the end."

Maurice Benard:
Right. With Lexapro, I read, thank God, that the first five days are going to make you feel worse than before you started taking it. And sure enough, and that's when I really came close to, because I'm taking this, and I'm feeling worse. And I'm like, "Okay, I'm done." But guess what? The sixth day came. Like the sixth day in the Bible. I don't know, there's something in there. And I remember looking at my wife, and I said, "I think I'm feeling a little better." She goes, "Good, honey. You're going to get better." I did.

Amy Morin:
I guess the irony of this is you're out there promoting your book, where the subtitle of your book is How Love and Lithium Saved Me On and Off General Hospital. And yet, you're starting to feel suicidal again during the pandemic, during this time when you're supposed to be promoting the book. But you found the courage to come forward and say, "Hey, look, I still have problems, despite the fact that I've been working on myself for so long."
Maurice Benard:

Yeah. That was just a... I think it was a weird period for everyone. But for me, it was just the high and the low and the high and the low, but more lows. But I wish, like I say to people, I wish I could redo the pandemic. I'd have the grace.

Amy Morin:

What would you do differently?

Maurice Benard:

Well, because my family was playing ping pong, basketball, running around, throwing parties, eating pizza, watching movies. And I'm in my room. And they'd go, "Come on, dad, you're going to..." "No, no, no, no, no." I couldn't function really.

I'll tell you something. I'll tell you, because I don't really like to talk about the cameos. But I got to tell you what happened during that period. I started doing cameos, and it started to get a lot. And I loved doing them. Cool. But for Mother's Day, I had 500 I had to do, as I was having thoughts of killing myself. My wife is like, "Honey, I'd just tell them no." I said, "No, no, no, no." Because I'd say to her, "Honey, I can't do..." I'd do 20. And I'm like, "I can't," because I was literally falling asleep. "Hi, it's Maurice." "Hi, how are you?" And they don't know. And they're so sweet.

No one complained, but they were horrible. I'm telling you, they weren't good. And I did the 500, half asleep, bad thoughts. That was during the pandemic. All stuff happened during the pandemic that was... But I tell you what, if I did redo it again, I'd have a great time. Because during that time, I keep saying this, because I have goats and alpacas. They're great. I'd go out, and I could just find peace in there and joy. Well, during the pandemic, I'd go out there, and there was no joy and peace. They were just there. Can you imagine now how months off, I can go out and just stay with the goats and the alpacas and just listen to music? Anyway.

Amy Morin:

However, do you think you would've started State of Mind, had you not gone through a really rough batch during the pandemic?
Maurice Benard:

Well, it's funny. I've only missed one State of Mind. Amazing, because I really couldn't get out of bed at that period. I started State of Mind in the car, before the pandemic, and just kept going in the car every Sunday, no matter how I felt. I was promoting the book at the same time, so I could do it together. And then I started getting worse and worse and worse. I don't know if people knew. Not that I would lie, I just didn't want to tell people that I was so bad that I wanted to end my life type of thing. I just didn't want to get into that. But I was pretty honest in how I felt and everything. Then YouTube started about a year... After the car, that was a year. And then, YouTube started after that. And now nobody wants me to do solos. They only want me to interview people.

Amy Morin:

But you have attracted a massive following. People really look forward to your episodes. They really want to know what you have to say. Clearly, a lot of people find value in the shows that you do.

Maurice Benard:

It's the mental health thing. Listen, I think if I was just Sonny from General Hospital, it would be maybe not as popular. But the mental health is very important because people like you, what you do, and what we're doing here. They like to hear from other people, celebrities, whatnot, that they've gone through similar things that they've gone through. The ultimate thing is, because I was going to quit State of Mind until somebody sent me something, and it was nothing big. I get beautiful things sent, but this was nothing big. She goes, "Continue to do your show. It makes me feel that I'm not alone." And I said, "Oh, man, all right." And then I kept going, I kept going.

It's amazing. I just did a police officer, and he didn't know he was bipolar till he was 50.

Amy Morin:

Wow.

Maurice Benard:
Because this guy came to kill him, and he shot him twice. The guy got on top of him, trying to kill him, and he shot him three more times.

Listen to this. He couldn't deal with, mentally, as a police officer, couldn't deal with it. And I said, "Is it safe to say that if it wasn't for your wife, we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for our wives?" He says, "No, that's not it." He says, "I love my family, I love my wife, my kids. But one night I took a gun, put it to my head, pulled the trigger, and it jammed. Didn't go off."

I just couldn't believe what these guys go through mentally. And he tells the story. It's amazing.

Amy Morin:
As a therapist, I have people that come into my office regularly, and they'll say things like, "Nobody would understand this, that I'm going through this," or "I feel really alone." But what they don't know is the next person who comes into my office often says a lot of the same things. So when you put people on your show, and you make these things public, I think it helps all of us know, just because somebody looks like they have it all together on the outside, we have absolutely no idea what they are battling on the inside.

Maurice Benard:
That's it. Yeah, that is it. Like I say all the time too, the pandemic is a curse and a blessing, because the curse is the suicides, and the blessing is there's just a lot more awareness. You watch TV. I swear, man, and I feel like I'm part of it. I'm watching TV, and I hear, "In Bipolar I, which if you have Bipolar I or Bipolar II, you have to get..." I'm watching the commercial, and I'm thinking, "Maybe I did something, man. Maybe a little bit there, yeah." But you see all these commercials - anxiety, depression - it's amazing, now, the awareness. We still have ways to go, but...

Amy Morin:
I think so too. 30 years ago, I guess back in your day, when you first started acting, they told you not to tell anybody you had bipolar. And look at you now. You're out there talking about it specifically. You've started your own show about it. Just to spread the
awareness on it. I think during the pandemic, it made all of us realize you're not either mentally healthy, or you're not mentally ill. It's a spectrum, and we all fall somewhere on the spectrum. On any given day, where we fall on that spectrum varies. And as you talked about, our environment plays a huge role in that. Even if you are diagnosed with a mental health condition, and you take medication, that's still only part of the puzzle pieces. You still have to do certain things to help manage your mental health.

Maurice Benard:
You should see a psychiatrist, you should meditate, work out, yoga, breathe, continue to, because like I said, anything to prevent it, so it just doesn't happen is I think the way I want to live my life. I don't know what I did before. Maybe I just didn't think. Maybe it was no. I think after the pandemic, it scared me so much that I was forced to look at it differently now. I think that's what happened. And the more I speak in my State of Mind room here, the more I see other people, how they deal with it. And what they do, and it helps a lot.

Amy Morin:
How much did the medication that you take now help with your anxiety?

Maurice Benard:
Well, I got off it at seven months, the Lexapro. Lexapro really got me back to normal.

Amy Morin:
Ah, so let's talk about that, because lithium you've stayed on, and Lexapro, you're able to take for a short time. Because people will ask me all the time, "How do I know when I can stop taking this? If I take this medication and I feel better, does that mean it worked, and I can stop taking it? Or how do I know if I need to stay on it forever?" How did you make that decision to come off of that?

Maurice Benard:
It was a gut feeling for me. I just knew that, after six, seven months, I didn't need it. I felt great, and I weaned off it. I was right. But I was talking to the psychiatrist, and he would
help me wean off, and then I did it, and it worked. And I've been good, man. I've been good. Damn.

Amy Morin:
Now you're probably aware of what happens when you go off medication. Did anybody else have any anxiety about you weaning off of it? Was your wife concerned that-

Maurice Benard:
My family, they always think I'm... Not lately, but in the past it's like, "I think you're going through a manic..." "What do you mean you think I'm going through...?" We always have this thing, if I get angry once, they're like, "Oh no, he's angry, he's yelling." It's like, "Allow me that." But they're very protective of me.

Amy Morin:
How have you managed to explain bipolar and what you go through to your children?

Maurice Benard:
Well, I talk to them a lot about what's going on, my past. They know. They haven't read my book, but that's all right. They know a lot about it, and it's good that I know that I am bipolar because I can see it in them. I can catch it early. They have a lot of knowledge of it. I can catch it early, thank goodness. Everything's been cool so far. Joshua, there in the period of the pandemic, I was in the car, and I was crying. And I said, "Buddy, I don't know if I can keep going really. I don't know." He goes, "Dad, what do you mean?" I said, "I don't know, buddy." And he looked at me, and he said, "Dad, I'll help you. I'll get you through this." He helped a lot, between him and Paula. It was amazing.

Amy Morin:
That is amazing to hear. As a therapist, when I work with people, sometimes they'll ask me that. "How do I explain this to my kids?" Or sometimes parents think they're doing their kids a favor by not telling them, and they try to keep it a secret. Well, kids obviously figure things out pretty quickly, and then they make up their own stories about what they might think is wrong. And if you don't explain it to them, sometimes they think like, "Oh
it's my fault," or "I've done something wrong." Or they just don't understand. What would you say to a parent who maybe says, "I don't know how to explain this to my kids."

Maurice Benard:

If you want to explain it to your... I just say with everybody, "I know it's hard, but just talk about it. Don't hold it in, because they're going to figure it out anyway. Just let them know what it is and whatnot. That way you're not holding it in yourself, and that is not good for you, to hold things in. Just explain to them the truth."

But it's become normalized now. It's not a big deal. Dad said, Dad tried to, he's mentally ill, and he was going through a period. Can you imagine if I held that in? Then, it would not be good. Then, it would be the big secret, and I don't want to talk about it. And then they'd find out about it. And then you have to open up at some point, or maybe not and you're going to keep holding it in.

I like being an open book. I encourage people to be an open book. Not to everybody. Some people you don't trust, whatever. That's different. I love being an open book. It's helped me out. I think it's helped me out a lot.

Amy Morin:

I see a lot of people who've carried around this family secret, and it might not even be their secret. It's that they have a parent or a partner or a child that has a mental illness, but they've kept it as a family secret. And they end up spending so much energy trying to hide something, trying to make excuses, trying to make sure that nobody else finds out. It's exhausting.

Maurice Benard:

Yeah, yeah. That's going to cause you to have a breakdown itself.

Amy Morin:

Exactly. But how about for you, because obviously, you have been very public, and you made your diagnosis and your treatment and the struggles that you've been through open to the entire world. What has that been like?
Maurice Benard:
For me, opening up, I started on Oprah 30 years ago. Somebody told me not to cry on Oprah, and it screwed up the whole... I think I could have been so much better, and now, because I wasn't being myself. I was trying not to cry. It's just ridiculous, when crying helps people. If I would do an interview now, it'd be like I'm doing with you. I'm not holding anything back or anything. I just let it out.

But it's been great to be able to speak about mental health, play a character that is bipolar, write a book, do State of Mind. It's all about helping people. I always said this, and I mean it. I don't want anybody to go through what I went through, because it's hard, man.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. My hope is these days that because we do talk about mental health more, that people will know that they're not alone, because I think that makes it so much worse, when you feel like you're alone in your struggles. And while it doesn't make you feel better necessarily to know that your friend, your neighbor, somebody else has something too, but just knowing, "Oh, they've been through this," that somehow that gives us a little bit of a peace of mind to know that if they went through it, maybe I don't have to be ashamed that I'm going through it as well.

Maurice Benard:
Yes. Absolutely. It's that thing, that person who sent me that thing, let us know that we're not alone. Make us feel we're not alone. I got it, I got it.

Amy Morin:
Yeah, yeah.

Maurice Benard:
I don't know why, and it's not a big... I've had other things that you think, "Oh my God, my son was going to do this and do that. And then he saw this." This is just a little thing that made me go, "Okay, this is why you have to continue."
Amy Morin:
I'm glad that you got that note, you got that message loud and clear, and that you're going to continue. The fact that you play this character on General Hospital too, who's this tough mob guy, and yet we depict him with bipolar, and they've done a really good job of making it look realistic. Sometimes when people have bipolar in a movie or on a TV show, they embellish things, or they don't make it actually realistic. Do you feel like his portrayal, your character's portrayal, has been true to life?

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, the portrayal's been good. There's been times when it's a little over-the-top soapy, but I try to bring it realistic with the bipolar. But this last one I did the beginning of the year was as true to... Even my wife who doesn't care about what... Not that she doesn't care. You know what I mean? So my wife, she's like, "Wow, that was...: It's as true to bipolar as I've played.

Amy Morin:
Wow. To go from 30 years ago, where they told you not to tell anybody that you had bipolar, to now playing a character who is being represented as somebody who has bipolar to now having this show where you're helping people feel less alone, that's pretty amazing.

Maurice Benard:
I'm very honored, very proud. Nothing makes me more proud than, seriously, than State of Mind, what I'm doing now. GH is great. I love it. But what keeps me ticking? Who can I get on? Who can I this, who can I, how can I help? How can I help? I'm starting to talk about the police, and I don't want to be political. But I want to get into kids and this and that and sorts of things. Kind of what you do, but go ahead.

Amy Morin:
You get so many interesting people though, who again, might look like on the outside, they have it all together. And then they open up on your show to say, "Actually, I
struggle with this." Or "I used to struggle with that." I think one of the bravest things that anybody can do is not just talk about their struggles in the past, but when you step forward and say, "And I'm still struggling with this right now." It's easier to say, "20 years ago I had depression-"

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, you're right.

Amy Morin:
"But I'm way better now." But to say, "And I'm still struggling," that's hard.

Maurice Benard:
If I was to go through anxiety and get on the show and talk to people, I'd love to. I don't want that to happen. But if it did happen, I'd like to see how I deal with it, because I haven't been in that chair messed up. That would be interesting. Not that I'm going to. I'm not a method interviewer.

Amy Morin:
Would you still do it, or would you cancel though? Or would you...?

Maurice Benard:
No, I would do it.

Amy Morin:
You would?

Maurice Benard:
I would do it. Well, if it was bad like the pandemic, I couldn't do it. I think I'd be... But anxiety or some depression. I've been in there with a tiny bit of anxiety, and I did it. But I'd like to see how that would work.

Amy Morin:
Interesting. That would be tough, I would imagine. How about these days, what do you do to manage your mental health now?

Maurice Benard:
I got two grandkids. I got goats, I got alpacas, I got my kids. I just enjoying life. The difference between me now and me years ago is there's a peace in me now. I never felt peace inside of me. It was always chaos. And I accepted it, like, "Okay, I'm bipolar, so I'm going to feel this inside of me, this chaos." Now, it's peace. And I tell people, "Now, I can go to the grocery store and talk to everybody." I didn't do that before. I wouldn't talk to anybody. I was just nervous to myself. Now, if you got to know me, we got close, I was who I am. But now I'm who I am with everyone, and it's a cool feeling. I think it's just being normal, how normal people are.

Amy Morin:
But to go that long in your life, without knowing that this was possible, or that you could experience that inner peace...

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, I wish I had known this when I was in my twenties and thirties. But I guess you have to go through some stuff to come out of it and figure it out. I think that's where I'm at. It's almost like peace within, God within, that feeling of just waking up in the morning and not being so heavy, and then your mind starts playing. Now I got nothing. Just cool.

Amy Morin:
And to be able to then share what you've learned with the world, to be able to say-

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, that's cool, that's cool.

Amy Morin:
Yeah, to be able to reach back and help other people who are still struggling and to be able to say, "Hey, maybe I don't have everything all figured out all the time. I still struggle, but yet here's what's helped me."

Maurice Benard:
Yeah, that's the beauty of being able to do that. I think people listen to me because, obviously, when you've been through stuff, people are going to, they're going to believe it much more.

Amy Morin:
Absolutely. Well, one last question for you. For any of our listeners, who maybe do feel alone or are struggling with something, what would you say to them?

Maurice Benard:
Somebody who's struggling and feels, just know it will pass. Just it will pass. Whatever you're going through, whatever you feel... And nowadays, I hate to say this, but we have social media. If you want to watch a program that will make you not feel alone, like Amy's or mine, you got it right here. I did that before I went to get help for Lexapro. I went on YouTube and looked. "Is it good? Is it good? What does she say? What does she say? What does she say? Okay, good, good." I didn't have that when I was young, so we're all lucky now.

Amy Morin:
I like that you said that, because we hear so much about how social media can be damaging for our mental health. But it can also improve it, depending on who you choose to follow and what you choose to tune into.

Maurice Benard:
Absolutely.

Amy Morin:
Maurice Benard, thank you so much for being on the Verywell Mind podcast. We will link to your book and to State of Mind, and we hope that everybody tunes in and hears more from your show.

Maurice Benard:
You were fantastic. I appreciate it.

Amy Morin:
Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is the part of the show where I'll give you my take on Maurice's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life.

Here are three of my favorite strategies that Maurice shared.

**Number one: identify your triggers.** Maurice says having too much pressure on him sends him into a downward spiral. So he's adjusted his lifestyle. He knows what his triggers are, and he's figured out how to avoid them. This is key to everyone, not just people who have bipolar. In therapy, we sometimes help people recognize the things that affect their mental health. I used to work with a woman who discovered that just one drink was enough to activate her depression, and she'd be stuck in a dark place for a few weeks. Another person I worked with learned that taking on extra projects at work triggered her anxiety, which then caused her to sleep less and work more, which then triggered a manic episode. So sometimes just keeping a calendar that logs your activities or even the foods you eat might help you identify the things that trigger your anxiety, your mood swings, or even just your bad days.

**Number two: recognize when you need help that's temporary versus ongoing support.** I like that Maurice talked about accepting that he has bipolar and knowing that he needs to stay on his medicine. But he realized that the difficult emotions he felt during the pandemic were temporary, and he was able to stop taking the medication that he took during that time.

One of the biggest misconceptions in mental health treatment is that people aren't sure when their illness gets better. They get confused about whether it's okay to stop taking their medication, or they want to stop therapy as soon as they start to feel better. But some conditions, like bipolar, can't be cured. There are treatments that manage the
symptoms, but the underlying condition lasts forever. Other conditions might come and go throughout someone's life, like depression. Someone might have a depressive episode a few times in their lives. Other conditions, like an anxiety disorder, might go away forever with treatment. But it's important to talk to your therapist or your doctor about your condition, the treatment options, and your prognosis so that you understand what to expect.

**And number three: help other people.** Maurice talks about the importance of helping people when you can. There's a lot of research on how helping other people is good for your well-being. It gives you a sense of meaning and purpose, and it can remind you that your hardships are an opportunity to potentially help someone else with their burdens.

Of course, you have to be in a position to help people though. I've seen a lot of people loan money that they didn't have, and it puts them in a worse position. Or someone who's already stressed out by how much they have to do (if they volunteer to help someone else), their anxiety might get worse. So keep in mind that there are many ways to help someone, and you might not be the best person to help with everything all the time. Saying no to some things now might help you get yourself into a better position so that you can help people down the road. But if you are in a position right now to help someone, do it.

Those are three of Maurice's strategies that I highly recommend. Identify your triggers, learn about whether a mental health issue is chronic or temporary, and help other people. If you can want to learn more about Maurice's story, check out his book, *Nothing General About It*, and make sure to check out his YouTube show called *State of Mind*.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of
your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*! And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who just won a Latin GRAMMY plaque for his work on Marc Anthony's album, Nick Valentin).