Dr. Frank is Chair of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance’s Scientific Advisory Board. Below is an article written by Dr. Frank from the DBSA Outreach newsletter, Spring 2005. DBSA: www.DBSAlliance.org

Scientific Advisory Board Update

Elements of Good Communication

In a previous column, I wrote about the basics of a good therapeutic alliance: education about illnesses and treatments and working toward wellness through positive lifestyle changes. A good therapeutic alliance is not possible without good communication. The most productive communication happens when you and your health care provider(s) work together and communicate openly to help you achieve the greatest level of wellness possible.

Since mood disorders affect a person's perception, you may face more communication challenges than individuals with other illnesses. Depression may make you think you don't deserve to feel better. Mania or depression can get in the way of your being able to interpret your clinician's efforts as being in your best interest. It may be difficult to work on improving communication at first, especially if your symptoms are severe. But keep working on it -- the results are worth it.

What can you do to help your health care providers improve communication?

- **Discuss your full range of symptoms** (mental and physical), life events, behaviors and anything that affects your wellness. Your provider should ask you direct questions such as, "Have you been having trouble sleeping?" or "Have you had thoughts of death or suicide?" If your provider asks more general questions, such as "How are You?" bring your own list of symptoms and issues to your appointment.
- **Be sure your providers know your treatment needs** and preferences. Recognize that you know more than anyone about your own mind, body and life. Providers should make an effort to understand the way you see the world and be sensitive to your cultural background. This includes giving you the opportunity to use your spiritual beliefs in your treatment.
- **Ask your providers to talk to you in a language you can understand.** Write down or repeat back anything that is complicated. If your providers are using medical terms you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask them for more explanation in simpler terms.
- **Learn everything you can** about your illness and its treatments so you can make informed decisions. Ask your providers for written information on your illness, along with a number you can call if you need help between appointments.
- **Find a provider who gives you hope.** Good mental health care focuses on the things you and your provider can do to improve your condition. A good health care provider will not act as if your situation is hopeless, tell you you're not going to get better, or say there's nothing else he or she can do to help you, unless he or she also sends you to see someone else with more experience treating your illness. A good health care provider reminds you that your illness is real, treatable, and not your fault.
- **Find out what you can expect** from your treatment, both positive (such as increased energy) and negative (such as side effects).
- **Ask your providers to accept input and feedback from your loved ones** if you think this would help your treatment.

It is normal to be worried about bringing up symptoms or concerns to your health providers. It is understandable that you might be nervous about looking for a second opinion. But you have a right to the best treatment possible. The more strongly you advocate for good treatment, the better chance you have of achieving the wellness you deserve.