The Importance of Understanding What Bipolar Is

by ANDREW MARC FELICIANO

Understanding Bipolar

With contributions from Eric Patterson.

Bipolar disorder affects about 2.9 percent of adults in the US. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), “Bipolar disorder, sometimes referred to as manic-depressive disorder, is characterized by dramatic shifts in mood, energy, and activity levels that affect a person’s ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.”

While this is a broad definition, there are four different major types of bipolar disorder. These types include: bipolar I, bipolar II, cyclothymic disorder, and other non-specified forms of bipolar disorder. The symptoms can range from euphoric manias to catatonic depression depending on one’s diagnosis. Each type of bipolar disorder has different symptoms that may require different forms of treatment, however they all should be addressed by a mental health care professional.

Misconceptions Surrounding Bipolar Disorder

Even though awareness surrounding mental health has increased, there are still plenty of misconceptions surrounding bipolar disorder.

Bipolar and Mood Swings

There are still many people who believe that any emotional outburst by someone who has bipolar disorder can be credited to the illness. While bipolar disorder can influence emotions and cause mood swings, it is *not* the sole cause of all of their emotions. This is dangerous because it’s an attempt to take away the validity or merit of that person’s emotions. It’s saying that their emotions are not valid due to the presence of bipolar disorder.

A second misconception is the thought that being bipolar just means that you have a hair-trigger-temper.

“She borrowed his pen for a second to sign the attendance sheet without explicitly asking and he lost it. I swear that man is so bipolar. One second he’s calm and the next second he’s raging!”

This notion is problematic for a wide variety of reasons. Firstly, it’s rooted in falsehoods. This is coming from the assumption that someone who is prone to outbursts of aggression must have bipolar disorder. Anger is not a symptom *exclusive* to bipolar disorder and it can be a product of a wide variety of symptoms brought about by other mood disorders (or just a few bad days).

While there is a connection between bipolar disorder and anger, it isn’t always prevalent in all cases. Many times anger and irritability are a result of the emotions directly brought about by the illness.

Secondly, this notion is dangerous. It spreads a troublesome misconception that unfortunately overshadows the

public's knowledge of the true symptoms of bipolar disorder. If people truly understood the consequences and symptoms of bipolar disorder, they'd be better equipped to encourage people who are experiencing these symptoms to seek professional help.

Lastly, this reinforces the misconception that anger is the sole or the most prevalent symptom seen in people with bipolar disorder. This is very counterproductive because some people won't be able to accurately acknowledge the specific potential dangers those with bipolar disorder may face when having a depressive, manic, hypomanic, or mixed episode.

Bipolar and Success in Life

Another common misconception is that having bipolar disorder will make it impossible to live a successful life. While everyone has a different idea of what success is, saying that it'd be impossible to achieve that successful life you want with bipolar disorder is a blatant lie.

There is no denying that bipolar disorder can influence your productivity when having an episode, but once you're stable and out of the woods you're more than capable of pursuing your goals. Not only will you be ready to make your own life improvements once stable, but you'll have a resilience and awareness of your emotional state that your friends without bipolar disorder won't have.

There have been plenty of successful people with bipolar disorder who have gone on to influence entire mediums like, Edgar Allan Poe, Vincent Van Gogh, Carrie Fisher, and even Winston Churchill.

With many misconceptions floating around, it can make it fairly difficult explaining bipolar disorder to friends and family.

Explaining Bipolar Disorder to Your Loved Ones

The emotions experienced during a bipolar episode can often be difficult to put into words, especially when attempting to explain them to someone who either does not have bipolar disorder, or someone who is not well informed on the matter.

Firstly, make sure that you've been diagnosed by a mental health professional before jumping the gun and telling people you have bipolar disorder. After your diagnosis, make sure that you do some research before speaking with your loved ones. It's easier to explain what's happening to you if you understand it yourself.

Consider asking some loved ones to join you during your next session with your mental health care professional. This is especially useful for those who may not have understood the explanation you gave them yourself.

Your mental health care professional will be more adept at explaining bipolar disorder (and your specific diagnosis) to your loved ones members than you, and they'll be better equipped to answer any questions they may have. Your mental health care professional is there to help, so don't be afraid to lean on them if you need to!

Next page: Living with a person with bipolar disorder and tips for understanding bipolar disorder further.

Living With a Person With Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder affects more people than just those who are diagnosed with it. It affects everyone around the person who's been diagnosed too. Witnessing someone you love and care about struggle with bipolar disorder can range from an unnerving experience, all the way to a traumatic one.

The unpredictability brought about by bipolar disorder can provide a variety of challenges for those living with someone experiencing an episode. While it can be difficult, it's important to try and be understanding. If the individual with bipolar disorder is not normally frantic or aggressive, but they are when they have an episode,

don’t be angry at the individual, be angry at the illness.

One of the most important things that you can do is to make sure that they have access to treatment, and that they’re encouraged throughout their treatment process. Make sure to let them know that you have their back.

Having a Significant Other With Bipolar Disorder

It’s difficult seeing loved ones experiencing a bipolar episode, however it can be even more difficult if it’s your significant other experiencing it. A bipolar episode can have an effect on the emotional, psychological, and sexual aspects of the relationship.

Once again, make sure not to blame any new erratic behaviors on your significant other, but on the illness. Try and make sure that they have access to the mental health treatment that they need. Don’t be afraid to get more involved in the treatment process if they ask you to (attend therapy sessions with them, etc.).

Just remember that your safety, and the safety of your loved ones with and without bipolar disorder, comes first. If it becomes extremely difficult to deal with, don’t be afraid to reach out to a local support group for loved ones of people with bipolar disorder. They may be able to provide you with the resources you need to cope, and they’ll be able to help answer questions that you may have.

Understanding Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder can be a very difficult illness to deal with. Whether you yourself are diagnosed with it, or one of your loved ones is diagnosed with it, it can bring a lot of complications into your life. However, it doesn’t always have to be an overall bad experience.

Not only can the process of treatment make you stronger as an individual who has bipolar disorder, but it will leave you and your loved ones better prepared for any potential episodes that may occur down the road.

If you wish to seek more understanding of bipolar, you may also try:

- **Seek therapy.** A therapist can help in many ways, including reducing symptoms and providing understanding. Also, a therapist can provide you with information to normalize your experience and suggest options that have worked for others. Bipolar is life-altering. Discuss aspects of grief and loss that are common with this diagnosis. Improving your mood will improve your perceptions of others.
- **Understand yourself.** Without having an understanding of yourself, you cannot hope for others to understand you. Bipolar is confusing. Symptoms can change daily, weekly or monthly. Sometimes you have long periods of stability followed by rapid changes. Monitor your symptoms and know what your triggers are. Investigating cycles based on whether or other external events provide you with a wealth of information. Assemble information from a therapist, psychiatrist or online resources to build a complete picture of yourself. Keep in mind that bipolar is not your entire life, only a portion.
- **Be assertive.** Once you have built a reasonable understanding of yourself, assertively communicate this information to the trusted people in your life. Assertive communication is the best type of communication because it allows you to state your thoughts and feelings clearly while respecting others. Let your supporters know what thoughts you experience, what they feel like and what they can do to assist you. Saying, “You’ll never understand” is aggressive and does little to help them or you. Saying nothing is passive and facilitates no change. Assertive communication is a perfect balance.
- **Adjust expectations.** Even with assertive communication, people may not fully understand you. After all, your experience is distinctively your own. Expecting them to react perfectly in situations is impossible and will lead to unneeded stress in the relationship. Consider if the person is making an effort to improve understanding and support their attempts. Continue to praise while encouraging them to make small adjustments, perceptions and responses.
- **Seek out understanding.** Depending entirely on your current supports can be frustrating and limiting. All people benefit from varied resources, especially people with bipolar disorder. Keep your old friends but seek out new ones. Maintain family relationships but find support groups in person or online. The new

supports may be more likely to provide you with the understanding you seek. Additionally, they may offer new suggestions to make others relationships more satisfying.