The Link Between PTSD and Bipolar Disorder

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PTSD and Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder and PTSD are two separate mental illnesses that can occur independently or in conjunction with one another. While they are two different diagnoses, they share some similarities while also having key distinctions between the two.

What Is Bipolar Disorder?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.”

Bipolar disorder is divided into four types based on the symptoms. The type of bipolar disorder one is diagnosed with is reliant on the symptoms that one is experiencing.

Mood changes often occur in episodes that can last anywhere from about a week to a month. However, there are instances where rapid mood cycling may occur.

Manic episodes can range from paranoid to euphoric, and depressive episodes can range from numb to catatonic. Hypomanic episodes can be seen as periods of higher productivity and energy.

Bipolar Type I consists of having a manic episode that lasts at least 7 days, as well as a depressive episode. Bipolar Type II consists of having a depressive episode as well as at least one hypomanic episode. Hypomanic episodes are similar to manic episodes, though they are not as severe.

Cyclothymic disorder is slightly different than the other types because it consists of cycling between hypomanic symptoms and depressive symptoms. These cycles tend to last at least two years in adults, however, they do not fully fit the criteria for hypomanic and depressive episodes.

The last type of bipolar disorder is other specified and unspecified bipolar and related disorders. This is for those with bipolar symptoms that do not match the criteria of any of the three other types of bipolar disorder.

What Is PTSD?

According to the Mayo Clinic, “Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.”

Unlike bipolar disorder, PTSD is a mental illness that’s caused by environmental factors. The symptoms of PTSD can start to reveal themselves one month after the traumatic event, but it is also possible that symptoms show

themselves years after the event. The symptoms of PTSD can have a significant impact on your professional life, school and personal relationships.

The symptoms are usually grouped into four different categories.

The first category of symptoms for PTSD is intrusive memories. These intrusive memories can be distressing memories of the event, and they can even occur as flashbacks where you feel you're reliving the event. These can also manifest themselves as nightmares or dreams.

The second category is avoidance. This category consists of avoiding the discussion of the event or even thinking about it. It also consists of avoiding situations, people or activities that you associate with the event.

Negative changes in your thinking and mood make up the third category of symptoms. These symptoms can heavily impact your personal relationships, as well as your overall happiness. These symptoms make you feel detached from loved ones and emotionally numb, and it can impact your ability to hold close relationships.

Changes in physical and emotional reactions can occur as well. You may find yourself being more likely to be nervous, startled or even paranoid. Many with PTSD feel like they constantly have their guard up. They may have increases in aggression and outbursts of anger. These symptoms can also impact one's ability to sleep.

How Are PTSD and Bipolar Disorder Similar and How Are They Different?

PTSD and bipolar disorder have their similarities and differences. However, it has been found that up to 40% of those with bipolar disorder also meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

Let's start with similarities first. PTSD and depressive episodes can have very similar symptoms at times. Not only can both force you to lose interest in things you used to regularly enjoy, but they can also provide a certain amount of emotional numbness. Irritability and emotional outbursts can also be prevalent in both.

In regards to PTSD's similarities with manic episodes, both people with PTSD and bipolar disorder can experience paranoia, and nightmares are possible. Like some with PTSD, those with bipolar disorder experiencing a manic episode may have trouble concentrating, however it is for different reasons. For those with PTSD, it can be due to the after-effects of the trauma, but for those experiencing a manic episode, it can be due to racing thoughts.

PTSD does not have the extreme emotional mood shifts the way bipolar disorder does.

Treatment for PTSD and Bipolar Disorder

Proper treatment for both PTSD and bipolar disorder tends to include treatment from a psychiatrist, as well as treatment from a therapist.

For bipolar disorder, medications such as mood stabilizers and antipsychotics may be used. While PTSD doesn't have medications specifically for the PTSD itself, it does have some medications that can be used to treat certain mood-related symptoms brought on by the PTSD.

It's important to receive proper treatment for either condition, because oftentimes one illness can trigger the other.

The Bottom Line

PTSD and bipolar disorder can be difficult to deal with on their own. However, it can become even more difficult when they occur in conjunction with one another. Receiving treatment for both can help combat the symptoms, and it can provide you with the coping mechanisms and knowledge needed to live a successful life with both illnesses.