Understanding the Hereditary Nature of Bipolar Disorder

by SAMANTHA STEINER

Does Bipolar Disorder Run in Families?

Bipolar disorder to known for its characteristic extreme highs and devastating lows. For many people who have been diagnosed with this disorder, it can often feel like they are at constant odds with themselves in a battle between good and evil. If you or someone you care about has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a lot of questions can arise. The who, what, where, when and why questions can flood your already racing mind. You most likely want to know what caused you or your loved one's bipolar disorder and if anything could have been done to prevent it. You may also be wondering, does bipolar disorder run in families? Let's find out.

Possible Causes and Risk Factors of Bipolar Disorder

Unfortunately, science hasn't been able to pinpoint the exact cause of bipolar disorder just yet. However, doctors and researchers do believe that several different factors may come into play when a person is diagnosed such as their genetics, brain chemistry and environmental factors.

Plus, having other mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or even PTSD can further increase the likelihood of a person developing bipolar disorder.

People who have an immediate family member, such as a parent or sibling, who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder appear to have a higher risk of developing bipolar disorder compared to someone who does not have any immediate family members with this disorder.

One thing you should understand is that getting such a severe mental health diagnosis is not something that you brought upon yourself. There are no known ways to prevent developing bipolar disorder either.

Can Genetics Really Play a Major Role?

The simple answer is that bipolar disorder does appear to run in families, which is a major reason some researchers do believe that genetics can play a role in who develops bipolar disorder. In fact, if one parent has a bipolar diagnosis, then their child's risk of developing the disorder increases by 10% to 15%. If both parents have bipolar disorder, those numbers increase even further to about 30% to 40%. As a matter of fact, when twins are involved and one twin gets a bipolar diagnosis, the other twin has a 40% to 70% chance of sharing that same diagnosis.

With that being said, the world is still some time away from knowing the exact causes of bipolar disorder and the role that genetics plays. However, it is believed that genetics alone are not enough to cause a bipolar diagnosis which is where the other key factors such as brain chemistry and environmental factors come into play.

When Bipolar Disorder Runs in the Family

When there is more than just one person diagnosed with bipolar disorder in a family, it is hard not to feel like genetics are not to fully blame. There can be some pros and cons to sharing the same diagnosis with other people in your family. There may be times when it feels like certain family members get more attention than others and that attention can shift depending on how everyone is feeling and managing their own symptoms. Someone who is feeling more stable than another family member may require less attention from the rest of the family compared to someone who may be feeling mentally unbalanced. Sometimes people who are bipolar need or want the attention to be on them which can sometimes spark some jealousy between one another.

A really big positive to having others who share in your diagnosis is that there will always be someone who understands you and what you are going through. It can be tough for some people who do not have anyone in their family who understands their mental state of mind. Having a mental illness can make you feel alone at times, so having other people who are diagnosed the same as you can take some of that loneliness away.

When there is more than one person with bipolar disorder in the family, it really can be a blessing in disguise. You can learn different things such as various coping mechanisms, different treatment options or even different medication side effects from your family member that you might not have previously been aware of. There are definitely more pros than cons in regard to sharing a bipolar diagnosis with other family members; even if it is just one other person that you are close to. Having that added support in your mental health wellness toolbox can be a real life changer. Sharing a diagnosis almost encourages you to form strong bonds with other people who are just like you.