The Benefits of Creativity for Bipolar Disorder

by BECKY WICKS

Bipolar and Creativity

Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "One must have chaos in one, to give birth to a burning star." More bluntly put, Lord Byron's opinion was, "We of the craft are all crazy."

Those two were born over 60 years apart and were extraordinarily different, but both were discussing the same idea, one that resounds through the arts: the interweaving of creativity and madness. It has been suggested that although Nietzsche and Byron differed in many ways, they both suffered from bipolar, like so many other famous creative people.

Throughout history we can see the relationship between the artist and imaginative states. You can see the dramatic shifts in mood in Tchaikovsky's compositions – most notably in Swan Lake, the changes in Plath's poetry as she struggles to pin down her sense of self swinging between moods, and in the famous painting *The Scream* by Edvard Munch you can almost feel the emotions that were coursing through the painter. One could surmise that the ancient concept of being visited by the Muses and the subsequent madness is a historical reference to those with bipolar.

As Voltaire (who was himself rumoured to suffer with bipolar) said, "Madness is to think of too many things in succession too fast, or of one thing too exclusively." This is a neat summary of how many bipolar people may feel during an episode, and an overall insight into the creative mind.

How Can Bipolar Fuel Creativity?

Bipolar is a mood disorder, characterized by periods of euphoria, sleeplessness, intense energy and flight of ideas, followed by those of deep depression. In certain types of bipolar, there is the potential for full manic episodes, which can result in psychosis.

Hypomania, the stage before a full manic episode, entails a new and heightened insight into the world, increased enthusiasm, a stronger sense of self, and a euphoric mood. People in a hypomanic state will also sleep less, have greater fluency of thoughts, and be more open to discussion with those around them, which could lead to an increase in productivity and creativity.

An extreme manic episode, however, entails significant impairment in function, and brings with it effects too enhanced to be able to live a stable life, let alone produce creative works, and it may be correct therefore to assume that inspiration or drive for creativity is achieved mostly in hypomanic states.

The depressive episodes that also form bipolar have potential to aid in the creative process as well, as the feelings endured during such a time may provide inspiration for a piece of writing, music or art when the person with bipolar disorder is in a more stable frame of mind.

Whilst the two states correlate quite strongly in an increase in creativity and higher rate of work produced, it is interesting to note that many famous bipolar people have stated that they actually work best when in a stable state of mind, perhaps drawing inspiration from previous moods whilst feeling healthier. This is likely due to manic episodes leaving people too disorganized and chaotic to focus and produce work, and depressive episodes leaving the person too drained to create anything.

A healthy state of mind will allow for reflection on what has been experienced, and provide new insight into what they had previously felt, resulting in the potential for new pieces of work to be produced, and a greater sense of artistic ability.

Next page: harnessing your creativity.

The Research

Although it is not always the case that someone with bipolar will excel in creative fields, a study conducted in Sweden across a 40-year period recently reported that, contrary to popular belief, mental illness as a whole was not linked to creative endeavours. The only mental illness showing a clear relationship with the arts was bipolar.

A different study, carried out at Stanford University, found that people who had bipolar and pursued some kind of creative discipline scored significantly higher than the control group on a creativity measuring scale called the Barron-Welsh Art Scale.

It is interesting to note that many first-degree relatives of people who have bipolar disorder – such as children – are even more highly represented in creative fields. Another study performed at Stanford University, this one in 2005, further confirmed this by publishing results showing that children who were deemed a ‘high risk’ for bipolar (e.g. having one or both parents with the disorder) scored much higher on a creativity index than the control group.

Possible Temptations

Given this proven link between bipolar and creativity, and the focus upon it, sometimes bipolar is romanticized, and even considered desirable. However, it is important to remember that bipolar is a mental illness, and therefore not something necessary to enhance creative genius. There are many artists who have achieved greatness without bipolar, and there are more people who have risen to fame without the disorder than with it.

For those with the illness, it might seem attractive to try and reach a hypomanic episode to enhance creativity or help produce more pieces of work. During these times, it may seem attractive to stop taking medication in order to bring on symptoms, or to indulge in other mood-enhancing behaviours such as drugs or alcohol.

These are important signs to watch out for in yourself or a loved one as they may be a precursor to a much more dangerous manic episode, which can be highly debilitating to the individual.

The other danger with a self-inflicted hypomanic episode is the crash of depression that will come after, leaving sufferers more at risk of damaging behaviour. With suicide rates in bipolar one of the highest associated with medicine, and that rate rising even higher if the condition is left untreated, it is important to be cautious and aware of you or your loved one’s state of mind.

Harnessing Your Creativity

It can be beneficial to a healthier frame of mind to harness the sense of creativity you may feel. Research shows that creative writing helps increase the function of the immune system, and all forms of the arts are conducive in treatment to help in discussing difficult emotions.

Bipolar can at times be damaging to your life, and lead to poor decisions that impact negatively in the future, and

so if the energy can be channeled into books, art or music, then this is a much more stable use of high levels of productivity.