

Addressing Common Myths About Bipolar Disorder

INTRODUCTION

There are many misconceptions about bipolar disorder. These misconceptions can lead to delayed diagnosis and treatment, inappropriate treatment, or negative patient outcomes.¹ Identifying and correcting common myths about bipolar disorder is an important step to ensuring patients receive the right diagnosis and treatment, which can give them a better chance at living fuller, healthier, more productive lives.

Learn how to address some of the more common myths about what bipolar disorder is and what it is not.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT BIPOLAR DISORDER?

Myth #1: "Bipolar disorder" is just another way of saying someone is "moody."

Fact: Bipolar disorder is not just a condition in which someone has "mood swings."^{2,3}

Being "moody" does not in and of itself mean someone has bipolar disorder. Depressive symptoms in bipolar disorder are different from typical deviations from euthymia that all of us experience from time to time. Bipolar depressive symptoms are far more serious and complex than changes in mood.⁴ Moreover, bipolar disorder includes symptoms of mania or hypomania as well as non-mood symptoms, like engaging in risky behaviors or experiencing impairment in functioning.⁴ Normal fluctuations in mood or affect, on the other hand, are not usually accompanied by mania, hypomania, or functional impairment.⁴

Myth #2: Bipolar disorder is a rare condition.

Fact: Millions of people have bipolar disorder.^{5,6}

Bipolar disorder is not rare. In fact, millions of Americans live with bipolar disorder.^{6,7}

- An estimated 1.5% of U.S. adults had bipolar disorder within the past year, and 2.1% will have bipolar disorder at some point in their lives.⁶
- About 45 million people worldwide have bipolar disorder.⁵
- Bipolar is often misdiagnosed or can take many years to diagnose.^{8,9} This suggests that the number of people living with bipolar might even be slightly higher than current prevalence estimates suggest.

Myth #3: Manic episodes are actually fun and help people with bipolar disorder to be more creative and productive.

Fact: Manic episodes are serious and are not enjoyable.⁴

Manic episodes are not positive and productive.^{2,10} Although some patients

with bipolar disorder can sometimes find manic episodes productive for a period of time, these mood states are often associated with:⁴

- Feeling distracted
- Not sleeping
- Making poor (and potentially dangerous) decisions
- Having racing thoughts

Myth #4: Bipolar disorder cannot be treated.

Fact: Many pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic interventions are available that are effective for treating bipolar disorder.^{9,11}

Bipolar disorder is treatable. Many treatments are available to help reduce bipolar disorder symptoms, improve functioning, and optimize quality of life.^{9,11} These include:

- Several effective medications⁹
- Nonpharmacologic interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychoeducation, and peer support¹¹

Myth #5: People with bipolar disorder are extremely impaired and cannot function in society.

Fact: With appropriate treatment, many people with bipolar disorder are able to manage their symptoms well.

Although challenges exist,¹² people with bipolar disorder can function and live fulfilling lives.¹⁰ For example:

- Many people with bipolar disorder get married.¹³
- It is estimated that about 40% to 60% of people with bipolar are employed.¹⁴
- People with bipolar disorder may regain adequate psychosocial functioning when in disease remission.¹⁵

References

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This handout is intended for your education and is not intended to replace a clinical evaluation by a healthcare provider. This is not a diagnostic tool.