

Common Misconceptions About Bipolar Disorder

In order to understand what bipolar is, it may be helpful to first learn what it is NOT. If you think back to the examples provided in the introduction to this book you may be able to think of additional examples – perhaps even some from your own life – of people making assumptions about what bipolar disorder is and what it isn't. Below you will find some of the most common misconceptions about bipolar disorder:

Myth #1: *Bipolar disorder is not a real disease.*

There is a great deal of stigma attached to all kinds of mental illness, especially one that is as difficult to understand as bipolar disorder. Bipolar symptoms can manifest differently in different individuals, but it is a real illness and one that can be treated. Dr. Suresh Sureddi of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center suggests that, “the perception of bipolar disorder should be in the same vein as other chronic illnesses” but, as of yet, it is not. Many people still believe that mental illness is not an actual disease but the result of some kind of weakness on the part of the sufferer. Even more saddening is the fact that many people also believe that mental illness can be conquered by sheer force of will – this leads many people who suffer from mental illness to avoid getting treatment for fear of judgement. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness – it is a sign of courage and strength.

Myth #2: *People with bipolar disorder cannot live a normal life.*

It is true that bipolar symptoms can have a serious impact on your life and, depending on the type and severity of your condition, it can impair your ability to fulfill daily obligations. Bipolar disorder is not by any means a death sentence, however – with treatment your condition can be managed and there is no reason why you shouldn't be able to live a completely normal life. With proactive treatment, bipolar disorder actually has a very high recovery rate. It is important to remember that bipolar is something you have – not something you *are*. It is an illness just like cancer or diabetes. While it may

require different forms of treatment, it doesn't need to consume your life or change who you are or what you can achieve.

Myth #3: Bipolar disorder causes you to cycle rapidly between moods.

This is perhaps one of the most common misconceptions about bipolar symptoms – that individuals with bipolar disorder shift rapidly from one end of the mood spectrum to the other. There certainly are cases when an individual might fluctuate between different moods multiple times within a relatively short period of time, but it is more common for individuals suffering from bipolar symptoms to endure extended periods of mania or depression lasting two weeks or longer. It is also important to note that not everyone with bipolar disorder experiences periods of extreme mania – in the next chapter you will learn about the differences between mania and hypomania.

Myth #4: For someone with bipolar, all of their moods are a product of their condition.

This misconception is absolutely untrue. Every person, regardless of their mental health status or any medical conditions they may have, experiences a wide spectrum of different emotions. Our moods are often the product of various environmental factors, influenced by stress, conditions at work, personal relationships, and more. Many people assume that bipolar disorder is an untreatable condition, one that cannot be stabilized, and thus every trait or emotion that person exhibits which seems to be beyond the scope of “normal” is attributed to their disease. This can be extremely frustrating for individuals experiencing bipolar symptoms – they often feel like they are not allowed to simply have a “bad day”. Every negative emotion is labeled a bipolar episode.

Myth #5: If you are taking medication for bipolar, you can stop when you feel better.

When you develop an infection and you end up taking antibiotics, the doctor always stresses the importance of finishing the entire course of medication. If you stop taking the drugs too early (even if you are feeling better), the infection could come back. The same basic principle applies to medication for bipolar symptoms. Just because you are

feeling better doesn't mean that you don't still need the medication – the fact that you are feeling better is a sign that the medication is working! Sometimes it takes weeks, even months to experience the full benefit of bipolar medications and, during that time, it is easy to feel like you have gotten things under control that you may no longer need it. Before you make any changes to your dosage or stop taking your medication, however, you should talk to your doctor – suddenly stopping your medication could result in very serious consequences.