

SEX Talks

Bipolar Disorder



Bipolar disorder is a mental illness in which people go back and forth between highs and lows, typically depression and mania. In the middle, they feel like themselves. Treatment should help stabilize those highs and lows. Although treatment is often successful, many people with bipolar disorder must take care of their health and well-being for the rest of their lives. Often, this includes some form of medication/s.

This disorder can make relationships challenging. During mania, people often experience hypersexuality, or increased desire for sexual activities or relationships. Women may be more likely to experience this than men (it is not known if this is specific to cisgender people). Interestingly enough, women have reported enjoying this aspect of mania. However, not all people with bipolar disorder are hypersexual. Some may even become celibate, or not have sex at all.

People with bipolar disorder can and do have healthy relationships, although if someone is currently in a manic or depressive state, it may be better to wait until they are stable before engaging in a new relationship. A healthy relationship can offer someone with bipolar support when they are unwell.



Relationships can be challenging when someone is in mania or depression. When a person is manic, they are more likely to take risks. This can include sexual risks. They may do things they normally wouldn't do when they are feeling healthy. For example, this might mean having more partners, or not using contraception during sexual activities. However, contraception is important because an unplanned pregnancy could be challenging to wellness while also putting the fetus at risk from certain prescriptions (e.g. valproic acid). But never stop taking any medication until seeing a health care provider, even if you get a positive pregnancy test result.

If pregnancy is a concern, talk to your health care provider about your medication, but also about reliable contraception. An IUD, for example, might be a more helpful form of birth control because you can leave it and forget it, even during a manic or depressive phase.

Relevant symptoms

- May want more sex during mania.
- During mania, inhibitions may decrease and the person may do things they might not normally do.
- May desire forbidden sexual activities.
- Sexual desire may decrease during depression.
- Medication may change or lower sexual desire, ability to become aroused, or ability to have an orgasm. Some medications may increase desire, though.
- People may see love as a cure for depression.
- They may buy more things for partners during manic times (including purchases they are unable to afford).
- Changing moods may create challenging symptoms for relationships.





If you have bipolar disorder

- Remember to use condoms if you are engaging in sexual activity with different partners.
- If pregnancy is a concern, consider a form that requires less intervention like a copper or hormonal IUD. You may forget birth control if you are feeling unwell.
- Get tested for infections regularly, especially if you do not always use condoms or dams.
- Talk to your health care provider if you are experiencing changes that might be as a result of medications. If you are having trouble with arousal, orgasms, or desire, you may need a different medication to enjoy your sex life.
- If you are going through a period of unstable emotions, consider getting stable before pursuing a new relationship.
- If you're not sure if it's love or mania, think about how you feel when you're not experiencing mania or depression.
- If you are in a relationship, make a plan with your partner to help you out if you experience troubling symptoms, like spending too much money or being overly sexual. Do it while you are feeling well.
- While some people associate a high sex drive (or hypersexuality) with bipolar disorder, some people prefer celibacy.
- Have frank conversations with your partners, as they may help you see early symptoms before they become a full blown manic or depressive state.



If your partner has bipolar disorder

- Ensure condoms and dams are used every time you have sex.
- Set up a safety plan ahead of a manic or depressive state so you can manage symptoms without them becoming serious. For example, set up a plan if spending sprees become an issue.
- Encourage your partner to seek treatment and stay on necessary medication as prescribed. Some people with mental illnesses stop their medications when they are feeling better, which can lead to a return of symptoms.
- Remember that while you can support your person 100%, you cannot control their disorder or cure it. Only they are responsible for taking full responsibility of their health.
- Educate yourself about symptoms so you don't take them personally.
- It is OK to set boundaries for yourself, even though your partner has an illness. There are some symptoms/behaviours you may not tolerate, so have conversations with your partner when they are well.
- Understand that some conversations may not go well when symptoms and emotions are at a high. Wait until a calm time.
- Sometimes people with mental disorders feel like a burden to their loved ones and partners: remind your partner regularly that you support them.
- If your partner is having a hard time, remember to take care of yourself. You can't support anyone if you aren't well too.

References

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Resources

Bipolar Hope at bphope.com

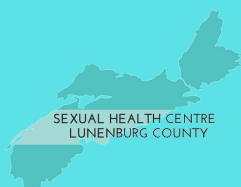
The Mighty at themighty.com

Healthy Place for your Mental Health at healthyplace.com

Sex Info Online at <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/home>

The info in this resource is not meant to replace trusted advice from a health care professional.

However, use it as a jumping off point for talking about your mental health and sexuality, which are both important.



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