

Facts about addiction and bipolar disorder

People with alcohol and other drug dependencies often suffer from co-occurring mental health illnesses.

Mental health and recovery

Individuals with untreated mental health issues may experience more difficulty in recovery.

The use of alcohol or drugs or withdrawal from alcohol or drugs can cause symptoms that mimic bipolar disorder. In these cases, symptoms may be substance induced and they will disappear with prolonged abstinence.

For others, the symptoms of bipolar may continue and worsen with prolonged abstinence, thus making recovery from alcohol or drugs more difficult. For these individuals, treatment options are necessary and available.

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is an illness that consists of extreme mood swings and behavior changes ranging from mania to depression.

Symptoms of mania:

- Hyperactivity
- Decreased need for sleep
- Flamboyant, loud, outrageous manner
- Pressured, loud speech
- Racing thoughts
- Poor judgment
- Grandiosity
- Unrealistic optimism
- Distracted easily
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (such as spending sprees)

Symptoms of depression:

- Ongoing sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, or worthlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decrease in energy or feelings of fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Insomnia, early morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness and/or irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment such as headaches, digestive disorders, or perhaps chronic pain

How common is bipolar disorder?

Among the general population it is estimated that between 0.4% - 1.6% meet the criteria for bipolar disorder.¹ Research suggests that 56% of individuals with a bipolar disorder also have a substance use disorder.²

Diagnosis of bipolar disorder

The effects of many chemicals can mimic the symptoms of bipolar disorder. For example, the use of cocaine and other stimulants can create symptoms of mania.

Withdrawal from cocaine and other stimulants can result in feelings of depression to include fatigue; loss of energy; excessive sleeping; loss of interest in activities; restlessness; irritability; and change in appetite or weight.¹

For individuals with addiction or substance abuse issues, it is essential that a careful and thorough assessment be completed by a mental health professional that has expertise in alcohol and drug dependency.

Treatments available

Typically bipolar disorder for alcoholics and addicts is treated with medication and therapy. Medications are particularly helpful in managing symptoms of bipolar disorder.

Medication compliance is a significant issue because many individuals start feeling stable and stop taking their medication.³ Ongoing monitoring of symptoms and medication use is very important. The use of medications is understood and supported by Alcoholics Anonymous.

It is important to discuss medication options with a professional who has knowledge about substance use and dependency. However, medication use and compliance is only part of the treatment for bipolar and does not replace the work of addiction recovery.

About Mental Health Services

Mental health services at Hazelden are part of the internationally recognized Hazelden Foundation. Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden's comprehensive approach to addiction addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

For more information about mental health services at Hazelden, please call 800-257-7800.

References

1. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Fourth Edition, Text Revision. (2000) American Psychiatric Association, Washington D.C.
2. Regier, D.A., Farmer, M.E., Rae, et al. (1990). Comorbidity of mental disorders with alcohol and other drug abuse: Results from the Epidemiological Catchment Area (ECA) Study, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 21, 2511-2518.
3. Daley, D., Haskett, R., et al. (1994) *Understanding Bipolar Disorder and Addiction*. Hazelden, Center City, Minn.