



Is it Moodiness or Bipolar Disorder?

Three Questions to Crack the Bipolar Disorder Code by Julie A. Fast

When I go to an event, I'm always asked what I do. And my reply is always the same: "I write books on the comprehensive treatment of bipolar disorder." I usually hear one of two responses from the listener:

One: 'Oh! My mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, coworker has bipolar.' or in a whisper, "I have bipolar. We need to talk."

We then have a conversation about medications, the toughness of the illness and how I stay stable enough to work. I hear a lot of stories and I give a lot of advice. I'm rarely at an event where someone doesn't have or know someone who has bipolar disorder- that says a lot about the prevalence of the illness, but that is another topic! Here is the second response:

Two: Isn't everyone moody? Doesn't everyone have a form of bipolar disorder?

Hmmm. Let's think about what this question implies. The asker is basically saying that bipolar disorder is not that odd and that all of us go through mood swings and maybe we are overreacting and diagnosing too many people with bipolar disorder and giving out too many drugs! I used to get upset at this question and then I devised a plan- I give a short explanation on why bipolar disorder is very, very different than moodiness. I do this by asking three questions.

When I'm done, the person and I then have a good conversation on the differences and they say, 'Oh! That explains my ex partner, my uncle's son, the person at work, etc!'

The Three Questions: How Bipolar Disorder is Different from Moodiness

Bipolar disorder is an illness that affects a person's ability to regulate their moods. It's not that their basic moods are different from other people's moods- the problem is that they are usually way more intense, sometimes dangerous, possibly lifelong and the person with the illness doesn't choose them. The brain chooses the mood and the person with bipolar often feels like a leaf blown in the wind...

... or a hurricane!

Bipolar has two main mood swings, both chemical:

Depression: A chemically created down swing where people feel hopeless, helpless, sad, weepy, irritated, negative or suicidal, etc. Depression has many symptoms, but as most people have felt sad or disappointed with life, this is the easiest symptom of bipolar disorder to understand.

Mania: A chemically created up swing that can either be positive (euphoric) or negative (dysphoric- also called agitated mania). Symptoms can include sleep problems, pressured speech, excitement, aggressiveness, creativity, grandiose thinking, compulsive sexual and spending behavior and an inability to recognize the mania.

If you're a person *without* bipolar disorder, you may naturally wonder how you're supposed to tell the difference between someone who is simply having a bad day vs. someone who is depressed. Or someone who is happy because they just got great news vs. someone who is manic.

The answer lies in three questions:

- Is the mood attached to an event?
- Is the mood a reasonable reaction to an event?
- Does the mood significantly and negatively affective personal and professional relationships?

Here is an explanation:

1. Is the mood attached to an event? If a person is down because they're getting divorced, it makes sense they would cry, slump their shoulders, feel hopeless and have an inability to organize their lives. This makes sense in the moment and is a reaction to a *specific event*.

In contrast, bipolar depression does *not* have to be attached to an event. In fact, many people with what society would consider amazing lives can be very depressed. The depression can just exist free form and make a person miserable and suicidal for no reason other than the chemical depression.

It's the same with mania. When someone falls in love, happiness and a very hopeful outlook on life are normal. Conversations are easy and make sense with a happy person. Their body language is happy, but not overwhelming. They can tell you about the specific event (falling in love) and *why* it makes them happy. Happy people may have trouble getting to sleep because they are excited, but they eventually close their eyes. In contrast, manic people can get super happy (euphoric) with no obvious event responsible for the change. They won't let you talk due to a compulsive need to say everything they are thinking. They get sexual for no reason and can spend money and ruin themselves financially in just a few weeks. If a person has agitated mania (dysphoric), they can also change overnight and become aggressive and extremely restless. Manic people don't sleep very much. It's can't be stressed enough that mania doesn't have to be attached to an event. It's chemical.

A reaction to a specific event = moodiness (positive or negative)

A mood that seems to come out of nowhere and isn't attached to a specific event = bipolar disorder

2. *Is the mood a reasonable reaction to an event?* When a person has bipolar disorder, their moods can be *excessive* or completely off the wall reactions to specific events that others without bipolar would be able to handle. For example, suicide attempts because of a not so serious break up, excessive excitement due to a promotion at work or very aggressive behavior when someone makes a non aggressive comment at a bar. People with regular moods know when to get happy and know when to get sad. They have control of their moods depending on specific events. People with bipolar disorder can feel out of control very easily, no matter if an event is happy such as a wedding or sad such as the loss of a job. They find it hard to be reasonable, even when they want to.

Many ask- what is reasonable? Reasonable means that the reaction makes sense. It's not confusing and doesn't have people saying, "What just happened? Why is she so upset? This situation isn't worth it! That's a really odd way to act."

Reasonable reactions that make sense = moodiness (positive or negative)

Unreasonable reactions that cause confusion and don't match the significance of the event = bipolar disorder

3. Does the mood significantly and negatively affect personal or work

relationships? In other words, the happy or sad behavior of an average reaction to an event doesn't completely disrupt work or personal relationships- especially long term. During difficult or happy situations, it's easy to support the happy or sad person, even if they get on your nerves! Those with bipolar who have unreasonable reactions to events overwhelm others to the point that relationships end or they get fired. This is especially true with untreated bipolar disorder. People who are in and out of mood swings are very difficult to be around and often nothing you say or do can make things better. This is when relationships may fail and family, friends and health care professionals are at a loss of what to do.

It's estimated that 50% of people with bipolar disorder refuse the diagnosis or can't see they are ill, even when their relationships are falling apart. Those with bipolar disorder can be so difficult that people eventually just leave or will spend money and go through great stress to get the person help- sometimes at the expense of their own health.

Small mood fluctuations such as negativity that may annoy someone or a happy outlook on life that creates a positive feeling = moodiness.

Moods that are excessive, mean, over the top, wild, always changing, average one minute and then wildly happy the next, etc = bipolar disorder.

How Do the Questions Affect You?

If you have bipolar disorder, answering the questions can help you examine the real you vs. the bipolar you. How does the non bipolar you react to events? How does the bipolar you react? How are your relationships? If they are great, there is a good chance you can easily answer the above questions. If you're having trouble with your relationships and can't seem to make them right, there's a good chance bipolar is involved and answering the questions can give you a lot of insight.

If you care about someone with bipolar disorder, the three questions can help you see when the person you care about is in a mood swing and when they are just having a good day or a bad day. This helps with communication and helps you know when a person needs professional treatment. It can also help you see why your relationship with the person isn't going well.

You now have three questions you can use to determine if yours or a loved one's behavior is moodiness or bipolar disorder. The next time you're at a party and someone says: "Oh come on! We're all moody! Doesn't everyone have a form of bipolar disorder?" you will know what to say!

Julie

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Julie A. Fast is the bestselling author of *Loving Someone with Bipolar Disorder*, *Take Charge of Bipolar Disorder* and *Get it Done When You're Depressed*. She works as a columnist and blogger for BP Magazine, www.BPhope.com, writes on mood disorder management for www.HealthyPlace.com and is a bipolar disorder specialist on the Oprah and Dr. Oz created website www.ShareCare.com. Julie has won numerous journalist awards for her work in the bipolar disorder management field including the Mental Health America Mental Health Journalism Award and the Eli Lilly Reintegration Award. Julie is a coach for partners and family members of people with bipolar disorder and has one of the top bipolar disorder blogs on the web at www.BipolarHappens.com/bhblog. Julie's treatment plan, *The Health Cards Treatment System for Bipolar Disorder* is used around the world as a management tool for those with bipolar disorder and those who care about them.

Julie was diagnosed with Ultra Rapid Cycling Bipolar II with psychotic features in 1995 and manages the illness through medications and the treatment plan found in her books. Her former partner of 10 years has Bipolar I. She deals with bipolar disorder daily, but believes that her Health Cards treatment system makes it possible for her to live a productive life. It's hard, but stability is possible!

Julie's Partner and Family Member Coaching

Visit www.JulieFast.com/family-coaching for information on Julie's coaching for family members and partners. Julie works with families and partners from all over the world and helps them learn the signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder, how to talk with a loved one who is ill and how to get loved ones into treatment—even those who refuse the diagnosis and/or refuse medications. Julie believes that no situation is impossible and that all family members and partners can learn techniques to change negative situations into safer and more positive situations very quickly. Please visit the site to contact Julie for a complimentary 30 minute session. Julie's last five clients got their partner/child into treatment .

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