

Marriage (or Deciding to Divorce) When Your Spouse Suffers from Bipolar Disorder

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July 1st, 2017

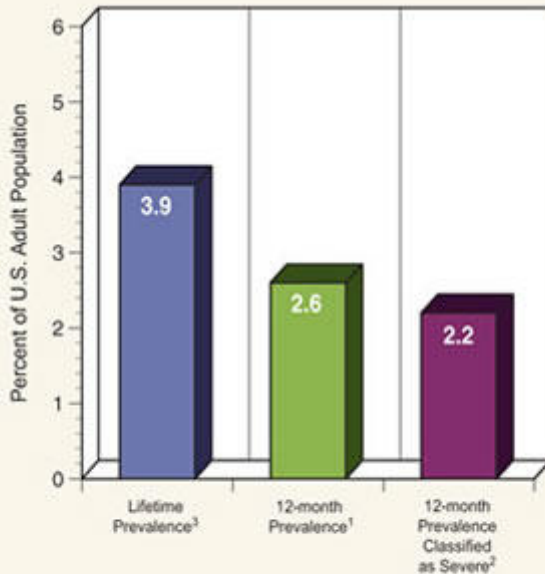
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Marriage Divorce and Bipolar Disorder

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 5.7 million adult Americans, or about 2.6% of the U.S. population age 18 and older every year, suffer from bipolar disorder. Of these cases of bipolar disorder, about 82.9% of these persons suffer from “severe” bipolar disorder. Men and women are equally likely to develop bipolar disorder, and all ethnicities and classes of people are affected. The typical onset age is 25, though it can start in childhood or even after the age of 50.

Prevalence

- **12-month Prevalence:** 2.6% of U.S. adult population¹
- **Severe:** 82.9% of these cases (e.g., 2.2% of U.S. adult population) are classified as "severe"²



What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.

There are four basic types of bipolar disorder; all of them involve clear changes in mood, energy, and activity levels. These moods range from periods of extremely “up,” elated, and energized behavior (known as manic episodes) to very sad, “down,” or hopeless periods (known as depressive episodes). Less severe manic periods are known as hypomanic episodes. (Source)

Much has been written about the challenges persons with bipolar disorder face. Less has been said about the unique challenges faced by individuals who are not bipolar themselves but find themselves married to a person who is struggling with bipolar disorder.

What are the signs of a manic episode?

According to the Mayo Clinic, a person who is experiencing a manic or hypomanic mood period would typically exhibit three or more the following symptoms:

1. Abnormally upbeat, jumpy or wired
2. Increased activity, energy or agitation
3. Exaggerated sense of well-being and self-confidence (euphoria)
4. Decreased need for sleep
5. Unusual talkativeness
6. Racing thoughts
7. Distractibility
8. Poor decision-making — for example, going on buying sprees, taking sexual risks or making foolish investment

What are the signs of a depressive episode?

A depressive episode will disrupt a person's normal day to day functioning. According to the Mayo Clinic, a person who is experiencing a depressive mood period would typically exhibit five or more the following symptoms:

1. Depressed mood, such as feeling sad, empty, hopeless or tearful (in children and teens, depressed mood can appear as irritability)
2. Marked loss of interest or feeling no pleasure in all — or almost all — activities
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting, weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite (in children, failure to gain weight as expected can be a sign of depression)

4. Either insomnia or sleeping too much
5. Either restlessness or slowed behavior
6. Fatigue or loss of energy
7. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt
8. Decreased ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness
9. Thinking about, planning or attempting suicide

What should I do to help my marriage and care for myself if my spouse suffers from bipolar disorder?

1. **Accept that you cannot “fix” your spouse, but you can support them as they choose to get help.** Bipolar disorder is a serious mental illness and not something you can fix for your spouse. It's nobody's fault, it's just a fact of life for some people.
2. **Offer your unconditional love and create a space for your spouse to open up.** Facing mental illness is incredibly tough and frightening. You can be a source of strength and hope for a mentally ill spouse.
3. **Educate yourself.** Arm yourself with knowledge. There are books, support groups, and other resources that can help you learn how to cope when a loved one has bipolar disorder.
4. **Renew yourself.** Marriage to a bipolar spouse can become an all-consuming task that swallows your previous self. You are so busy supporting them you lose sight of your hobbies,

your needs, and your identity. This isn't healthy for anyone. Make time for yourself to do what you like.

5. **Set limits, and even ultimatums if necessary.** Mental illness does not excuse abuse of any kind. You should offer your support, but your spouse must meet you halfway by agreeing to seek and accept treatment for their illness. Relationships mean working to support our loved ones and minimize hurtful behaviors. This applies to everyone.
6. **Get professional help.** If you can, insist that your depressed spouse see a physician or other licensed health care professional who can provide an initial evaluation and a referral to a psychiatrist if necessary.. Regardless of whether you are able to get your spouse to see a professional, it's a good idea to seek out professional counseling for yourself. Having a bipolar spouse means you face unique challenges. You need a support system too, and talking to a professional counselor on a regular basis is an excellent way for you to receive the support you need.

Divorce when your spouse is suffering from bipolar disorder

In some cases, a person with a bipolar spouse eventually comes to the conclusion that they wish to end their marriage. In some cases, a spouse suffering from bipolar disorder absolutely refuses to seek help, sometimes for years. They may start acting out in other ways or suffer from substance abuse issues, or even become abusive. In any case, deciding whether or not to divorce your bipolar spouse is

an intensely personal decision that only a person in that situation can make for themselves. The choice to stay and the choice to leave are both right for different people.