

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder / Bipolar Illness

The Symptoms of ADHD and Bipolar can appear to be similar. If a child has ADHD, he/she may be at risk in developing Bipolar Illness. Researchers have estimated that 9% to 35% of adults with bipolar disorder also have ADHD. Many people with bipolar disorder may find that even when their mood is stabilized with the right medication and treatment, they still struggle to meet deadlines, keep their focus on a task and stay organized. Many times, they feel mentally defeated and blame themselves for not being motivated enough to change their behaviors. ADHD symptoms may include the following.

1. Trouble focusing on a task
2. Feelings of restlessness
3. Organization problems
4. Feeling easily frustrated
5. Poor time management
6. Impulsive decision making
7. Poor coping skills for stress

There are overlapping symptoms of ADHD and mania, or hypomania associated with bipolar disorder. Indications of ADHD can include the onset of ADHD symptoms at an early age and the absence of depressive, manic, or hypomanic episodes. If symptoms are cyclical and there is an increase in goal directed activity, and inflated sense and a decreased need for sleep, then a person may be experiencing a manic or hypomanic episode rather than, or in addition to ADHD.

In order to accurately diagnose ADHD and/or bipolar disorder, your doctor will need to rule out other potential diagnoses that may cause symptoms. These can include sleep disorders, head injuries, other physical injuries, anxiety disorders, major depression, personality disorder, the effects of medication and the effects of substance abuse. They may also need to rule out environmental and situational stressors that can produce symptoms.

Although symptoms of bipolar disorder typically don't emerge until adulthood, children can receive a diagnosis. A child with both ADHD and bipolar disorder will have behavioral outbursts, experience severe mood swings and act impulsively. If a child with ADHD exhibits, demonstrates risky sexual behavior, engages in self-harm, and has little need for sleep, then he or she also may be experiencing mania associated with bipolar disorder.

A co-occurring diagnosis of ADHD and bipolar disorder can put people at higher risk for substance use, relationship problems, suicidal behaviors, and legal problems. Early treatment is essential for healthy functioning. Because the effects of bipolar disorder are more severe if left untreated, treatment considerations typically involve stabilizing your mood before treating the symptoms of ADHD. This often involves a combination of medication, therapy, and education.

Roughly 65% of people with ADHD and bipolar disorder will experience an anxiety disorder in their lifetime. Many professionals say that medications that treat bipolar disorder are unlikely to exacerbate the symptoms of ADHD. If you think you might have a diagnosis of ADHD in addition to bipolar disorder, make an appointment with your doctor and discuss your concerns.

“Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder / Bipolar Disorder“, Ronald G Rossetti, MBA, Article #13, Volume #1, Series #1, International Alliance for Mental Health (2020)