

STRESS

and its effects as a result of Bipolar Disorder

Including Interventions to Treating Stress



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Abstract

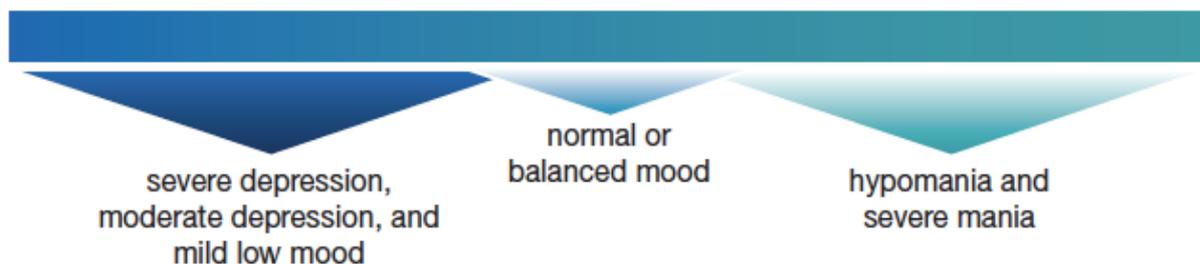
Many Australians, including young Australians, are diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder each year, falling into the 6.2% of the population who were diagnosed with an anxiety related mental illness in 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics) . The extreme mood swings - the manic, euphoric highs and lows of depression - of Bipolar Disorder lead to an immense stress upon sufferers. By exploring the psychological, physiological and social effects this stress places on sufferers of Bipolar Disorder, useful interventions can then be utilized to both reduce current stress levels and prevent further stress as well as the intense anxiety that this illness can be the basis for.

By conducting research on internet sites such as support sites and government sites, as well as looking at previous research and journal articles, such as those found on the APA website 'psycnet' and other mental health journals, it is possible to determine which interventions may be the best for the treatment of stress and anxiety as a result of suffering episodes brought on by Bipolar Disorder. These interventions include certain forms of meditation, as well as maintaining a regular diet and routine to try and reduce the stress caused by chemical imbalances that are related to lack of sleep, mood swings and appetite.

Introduction

Bipolar Disorder is an anxiety based illness, a chemical imbalance that creates abnormal shifts in mood, often leaving the individual suffering with a lack of energy and an inability to properly carry out daily tasks (Newman, Leahy, Beck, Reilly-Harrington & Gyulai, 2002). These mood shifts may include one or more of the following:

1. Episodes of mania - an intense high, often a euphoric experience of immense joy and hypomania - an increase in energy levels, but not as severe as episodes of mania; and
2. Episodes of depression - these are intense lows, more severe than general 'lows' or having a bad day, these episodes of depression can often lead to suicide in Bipolar sufferers. When experienced for a long period of time, this depression can become known as dysthymia (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008a).
3. During both highs and lows, sufferers may also experience great irritability and often rage.



Note: Reproduced from 'Bipolar Disorder' (p.3) by National Institute of Mental Health (US), 2008

These acute symptoms do not stand alone, and due to Bipolar associated depression being diagnosed as "diathesis-stress" disorder, the two (Bipolar Disorder and stress) are undoubtedly linked (Newman et al., 2002). The stress of suffering from Bipolar disorder can lead to many psychological, physiological and social side effects, which can generate immense amounts of stress on the mind and body. Dealing with the stress that is caused by Bipolar Disorder is integral to living alongside the disease and leading a happy and productive life.

Effects of Stress as a Result of Bipolar Disorder

A mental illness like Bipolar disorder puts a lot of stress on the mind, and this stress can have quite shocking psychological effects. Not being in control of one of the most fundamental human experiences - emotion - can create a very acute stress. While most people have the ability to keep emotions under control, Bipolar sufferers are unable to overcome the emotion being experienced during an episode of mania or depression, which mostly come on without warning and with no catalyst. When an individual is experiencing an illness that leaves moods unpredictable, this can create intense feelings of anxiety, leaving the individual feeling out of control. This feeling of not knowing what mood might be experienced in the next hour, and not knowing when the next mood shift might occur, can also create an irritability in sufferers. This irritability can leave individuals suffering an episode with a feeling of guilt, concerned about the way in which they treat others, and the fact that this is also often out of their control (Asbury, 2010).

Not being in control of ones feelings can also create a sense of helplessness, where the sufferer is unable to do anything to control their episodes without taking medication, and even when medication is prescribed, these episodes can still be quite severe; this in turn can leave an individual with an extreme drop in self-esteem. Not feeling that you are worth anything can cause stress in work or study situations, as the individual then feels that they are not able to perform sufficiently and this often leads to their falling behind in areas of work. A build up of work due to lack of motivation can become very stressful, and alongside an increase of anxiety due to mood shifts, rifts begin to appear in relationships. These feelings of helplessness, the breakdown of relationships, the lack of control and the escalation of work expectations can produce so much stress that thoughts of suicide become common among sufferers of this disease. People who suffer from Bipolar disorder fall into the thousands of Australians suffering from a mental illness, for whom suicide is in fact the leading cause of premature death according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007).

This excessive stress also contributes to physiological effects, such as a lack of energy, sleeping and eating disorders; this happens when the circadian rhythm of the body is disrupted (Reach Out Australia, 2010). Due to the immense amount of stress being placed on the mind, the body also takes it toll; having abnormal stress levels can impact routine, causing the body to fall out of regular sleeping patterns and affecting appetite, which in turn can also lead to weight loss and weight gain (Asbury, 2010). These changes in weight can link back to the lack of self-esteem. While these eating disorders may be categorized as separate disorders, they still have a base cause in the mental illness that is Bipolar Disorder, and the stress of these disorders can be substantial. When an individual suffers from an eating disorder, whether it be linked with a lack of eating or over-eating, the resulting stress lies in the anxiety of judgement from others; but there is also the stress the disorder has physically on the body. With under-eating, the body is not getting the necessary dietary requirements, leaving the body lacking energy, which can cause lethargy, which generates a lack of motivation, and this is stressful when work and expectations are high.

Due to overwhelming stress, Bipolar sufferers can also often experience problems with sleeping patterns, which will differ in individuals. Energy levels and sleeping issues are intrinsically linked to appetite and eating patterns. Some individuals may feel excessively lethargic, sleeping up to fourteen hours a day according to Asbury (2010), which is likely linked to over-eating and overindulging in foods that don't supply any nutritional value. On the other hand, others may have such excessive energy that they suffer from insomnia: the inability to sleep properly, if at all; insomnia is often linked to an excess of energy, creating hyperactivity, which is commonly experienced during manic episodes. These effects of lethargy or hyperactivity can also lead to stress, as previously discussed. Due to a lack in motivation in the case of lethargy, causing responsibilities to build up and become overwhelming. In the case of hyperactivity, stress begins to manifest itself physically, resulting in ailments such as headaches and a lack of concentration. The majority of Bipolar sufferers tend to have a lack of focus, often starting a new task before finishing another, once again, the stress here lies in responsibilities being ignored or unsatisfactorily finished.

Lastly, there are many social stresses associated with Bipolar Disorder, particularly, as has already been looked at, is the breakdown of relationships. Due to the extreme nature of Bipolar Disease, it is often the case that friends, partners and even family are unable to handle the shifts in mood - the cyclical nature of the illness can be quite disturbing to family and close friends - particularly the irritability, rage and negativity - such as the feelings of depression, and thoughts of suicide (Newman et al., 2002). It is these breakdowns in relationships that can put immense stress on an individual. One of the most important things to someone suffering from a mental illness is a strong support system, and when these relationships start to fall apart, it can leave the sufferer feeling even more alone than ever. This results in the worry of pushing people away, and again links into the feelings of guilt, and of having no control over emotions and emotional episodes.

It can also be very stressful for a sufferer in general social situations. Having to either tell people about having a mental illness upon first meeting them, or worrying about having an episode in the presence of others, can have very stressful effects on an individual. In everyday situations, at work or school, as well as general social situations, a sufferer will have the anxiety and stress of how to approach the subject with peers, colleagues and even strangers weighing on them for most of their adult life. This stress, combined with the psychological and physiological stresses, also often lead to patients of Bipolar Disorder using addictive substances, most of which lead to addiction (Maremmani, Perugi, Rovai, Giovanni, Pacini, Canonico, ... Akiskal, 2011).

Interventions for the Treatment of Stress as a Result of Bipolar Disorder

One of the greatest skills a sufferer of bipolar can learn is how to self-manage - this allows individuals to have some form of control over their anxieties and manage their stress. Circadian rhythms focus on a 24 hour period, which includes day and night, and how our body actually responds to these natural changes. The body relies on this natural cycle to regulate itself; this concerns mood, sleeping patterns and appetite. It is when the body is suffering from immense amounts of stress that it falls out of sync with this circadian rhythm, also referred to as the biological clock or master body clock (Reach Out Australia, 2010).

By keeping a written journal or log, patients can get on top of their out-of-sync body clocks and get a sense of routine back into their day-to-day tasks, as well as keeping sleep patterns normal and keeping the diet healthy. As well as helping to keep routine regular, this journal or log can also help to monitor episodes, and can bring peace of mind to sufferers, and help them to see patterns in their episodes and symptoms, allowing them to feel more in control (Newman et al., 2002). Allowing patients to feel more in control of these things that they were feeling was completely out of their control, allows for stress levels to be brought back to a more normal level, as they are able to manage stress more comprehensively by using knowledge and a visual aide to maintain routine and a healthy lifestyle. This healthy routine with ideal sleeping and eating habits becoming achievable also creates more regular energy levels, allowing patients to participate in their day-to-day activities with ease and confidence.

Diet is a major factor in keeping stress under control. This idea of diet in relation to stress has a cyclical effect: when one is under a lot of stress, eating habits become irregular and undesirable foods (according to the body) are being indulged in, this includes social drugs, such as large amounts of coffee and sugars, and also cigarettes and alcohol; not participating in healthy eating, in turn, puts stress on the body as it is not getting the energy and nutrients it needs to run smoothly and keep the body stress free, this is important as stress is actually a key player in obesity (Rosch, 1995).

As previously discussed, patients with Bipolar Disorder often have an affinity with social drugs, such as coffee, tobacco and at times alcohol, often which leads to addiction. These legal drugs are often used by patients of mental illness, particularly those tied with depression, as an

escape, and 'needing' this escape with increasing frequency is what can cause addiction to these substances. An addiction to any substance can create a large amount of stress due to 'cravings' and the stress of needing something to keep you feeling happy (Maremmani et al., 2011). As well as the stress of addiction, these habits can also cause stress on the body as they are promoting unhealthy eating habits and an unbalanced diet. This links back to keeping a journal or log of daily activities and utilizing this maintenance of diet to eat healthily, avoiding depending on drugs such as alcohol, coffee or tobacco to reduce stress, or create an escape.

Another stress reduction technique that can be particularly helpful in regards to stress as a result of Bipolar Disorder is an ancient form of meditation modernly known as mindfulness. This technique helps to promote relaxation in the mind and body and lets the individual both manage the stress and control it to a certain extent. that being not allowing it to take over and start to impact physically; the results of which were discussed in the physiological section above. The most common form of relaxation meditation is mindfulness, which originated in Buddhist Vipassana and is well known in Zen practices. According to Manzaneque, Vera, Ramos, Godoy, Rodriguez, Blanca, Fernandez and Enguix (2009), unlike more traditional meditation that requires one to try and 'empty the mind', mindfulness works on a much simpler idea - instead of trying to empty the mind by focusing solely on one point, or sound, mindfulness empties the stresses from the mind by replacing them with observation. In order to do this, one needs to simply observe what is happening around them, moment-by-moment in a non-judgmental fashion.

What mindfulness effectively achieves is a separation from the stress, it allows the mind to let go of the stress and stressful thoughts, of anxiety and negativity and instead focuses on sounds , objects or movements that are going on in that particular moment, it allows the mind to literally observe everything around it and use these sounds and images to push away the stress that has manifested in the mind. Mindfulness is ideal for treating the stress associated with Bipolar Disorder as it doesn't require an overwhelming amount of focus, the way traditional meditation might. When performed consistently (at least three times a week) on a long-term scale, mindfulness meditation has been proven to have quite an astounding calming effect, on the mind and the body, particularly in persons suffering a mental illness (Manzaneque et al., 2009).

Conclusion

An individual who has been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder suffers mostly from severe mood shifts from manic to depression. These mood shifts are what put severe stress on the mind, body and also social relationships. Research has shown that in order to successfully manage these stresses, patients need to be able to keep on top of diet, in particular, but also sleeping patterns and should learn to monitor moods to learn their patterns. Managing diet has proven to be especially effective in managing stress. Finally, mindfulness is a proven way to escape the stress of episodes brought on by Bipolar Disorder, without turning to social drugs and falling into addiction, and is particularly effective in Bipolar Patients who suffer from a lack of focus. By utilising these interventions, a patient suffering from bipolar disorder can successfully manage stress levels, and in the long term, avoid further health complications, and serious incidences such as suicide.

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