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Pessimism Among People With Bipolar Disorder Is A Predictor Of Relapse

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Careers



It's important for managers and HR to understand when employees have bipolar disorder. GETTY

If you're like most people, you sizzle when disappointments and letdowns come at lightning speed from all angles. Pressures, obstacles, interruptions, delays, rejections and unrealized expectations can feel like pummeling bullets, and you might hit the roof before you know it. Perhaps something your manager or a coworker says or does besieges you with emotion, sending you over the edge. And after the damage is done you regret it. We now know more about why it's difficult to control those hair-trigger reactions and the little-known secret to managing them.

Negativity Bias

Mother Nature equipped us with a *negativity bias* to keep us out of harm's way. This bias causes us to overestimate threats and underestimate our ability to handle them. Mother Nature baked in the negativity bias to zero in and target a threat. Your heart races, eyes dilate, and breathing escalates to enable you to fight or flee. As your brain zooms in, you make judgments that constrict your ability to see possibilities. Your focus is narrow like the zoom lens of a camera, clouding out the big picture. And it has to be this way to save you in an emergency. But over time when these maneuvers become a daily routine, you build blind spots of negativity without realizing it.

New Study On Bipolar Disorder

Pessimism is a perspective that can sneak up on any of us at any time. But if you're someone who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, chances are you are more likely to see the glass as half empty instead of half full. According to the American Psychiatric Association, bipolar disorder is estimated to affect approximately 3% of the general population. It is characterized by successive periods of elation (mania) and depression, interspersed with asymptomatic phases, called euthymia. People who have shorter periods of asymptomatic euthymia are more likely to suffer disability, unemployment, hospitalization and increased suicidal feelings.

The findings of a new study could provide an urgently needed tool for employees with bipolar disorder, employers and HR personnel to predict relapse and intervene in a timely manner. Scientists have known for a long time that employees diagnosed with bipolar disorder tend to give negative information more weight than positive information, leading to pessimistic views that may make their bipolar symptoms worse.

According to the [new study at the University of Parma, Italy](#), the tendency for people with bipolar disorder to have pessimistic beliefs accurately predict impending relapse. A research team carried out a belief update task with 36 people with bipolar disorder and then monitored them every

two months for five years to see when they developed symptoms of a relapse. In the belief update task, patients were given information about 40 adverse life events, such as robbery or credit card fraud. They were asked to estimate how likely they thought the event was to happen to them.

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Next, participants were given information on the real probability of the event happening. In some cases, they received bad news (for example, a higher chance of a robbery than they thought) and in some cases, good news (for example, they were less likely to be a victim of card fraud than they thought). In a second later session they were asked again to estimate their own likelihood of encountering the event. The difference between how much they updated their beliefs in response to good or bad news (called the belief update bias) was then compared with how soon they had a relapse.

The analysis showed that people who had a greater change in their beliefs in response to positive information, and were more likely to take an optimistic view, had a longer time period before the next onset of symptoms. "Our findings show that the extent to which bipolar patients updated their beliefs in response to positive information, compared with negative information, was predictive of when they would relapse," concludes senior author Tali Sharot, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University College London, UK. "The way patients update their beliefs could be introduced in the future as a risk prediction tool for bipolar disorder, allowing patients and clinicians to step up vigilance to recognize symptoms and intervene where necessary."

Positivity Bias

There is no known “cure” for bipolar disorder, however, positivity bias can offset the negativity bias. Previous research has shown that being optimistic is associated with more gray matter in regions of our prefrontal cortex. And it literally expands our peripheral vision, allowing us to see more possibilities and solutions to problems than pessimism, which limits our outlook. Optimism unlocks our personal resources and capabilities to deal with an opportunity embedded in a hardship.

Studies show that if you're an optimist, you're more likely to scoot up the career success ladder faster and farther than a pessimist. One study showed that sales personnel with an optimistic outlook sold 37% more life insurance in their first two years than pessimists. Other studies show that you adopt healthier habits, too. Statistics reveal that, if you're an optimist, you have a lower stress level and a more stable cardiovascular system than average, and you have a stronger immune system. You're happier, have fewer health complaints, healthier relationships and live an average of seven and a half years longer than average.

If you have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder or are an employer or worker in HR, it's important to recognize how a pessimistic outlook, combined with job stress, can signal a potential bipolar relapse. When early signs of pessimism or hopelessness are present, 10 initial strategies can enhance a positivity bias as part of a larger treatment plan that might also include medication adjustment or regular additional psychotherapy:

- Dwell on your personal resources.
- Avoid blowing disappointments out of proportion
- Identify the upside of a downside situation
- Underscore positive feedback instead of letting it roll over your head
- Focus on the solution instead of the problem

- Find the opportunity in a challenge
- Pinpoint upbeat news wrapped around downbeat news
- Don't let one bad outcome rule your future outlook
- Name three positive things in your life you're grateful for
- Practice **HALT**: Eat when **Hungry**, let out **Anger** in a constructive way, call someone when **Lonely** and rest when **Tired**

For more information on dealing with bipolar disorder go to [HelpGuide](#). This guide will help you navigate the challenges and support a coworker, friend or family member.

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