Manic-depression? [1]

Dear Alice,

I'm worried that I might be manic-depressive, or bipolar-depressive, though I'm not quite sure what the exact medical definitions of those terms are. From time to time - sometimes over a couple of hours, sometimes over a couple of weeks, I can get very depressed, and everything in my life seems like it's going wrong - school, work, relationships, etc. These happen at night and during the winter more often than usual, but they happen fairly regularly all year round, for at least the last three to four years. Other times, even for weeks at a time, I'll feel fine; get really happy with certain things; not ecstatic, but happy. I also find that these depressive states can be brought on by certain things, like an argument with someone or just something that pissed me off. But then they get better, usually before I have a chance to see a counselor, and I feel silly for having felt that way at all; things seem much rosier at those times. I've seen counselors some before, but never wanted to bring it up - I was hoping they'd guess at it on their own; I did describe all my feelings, just not that I thought I might be manic-depressive. I always thought that I was just being a hypochondriac. What do you think?

Signed,
Bipolar?

Answer

Dear Bipolar?,

With all the juggling life entails between the things you mentioned - school, work, relationships, among others - ups and downs are certainly to be expected. But if you feel like you are riding a vicious rollercoaster of emotion with no avail, it may be helpful to bring in an expert perspective, like from a mental health care provider.

Bipolar disorder (also called manic-depression) varies from person to person, and can really only be diagnosed by a professional. However, general trends in people experiencing this disorder are consistent: during depressive times, people often don't feel pleasure in anything, lack energy, and may be lethargic, lonely, and especially sensitive, sometime to the point of tears over seemingly small things. Part of this depressive cycle may also include feeling irritable, having difficulty concentrating, or feeling unloved, all of which are common for this phase of the bipolar swing.

Alternately, on the manic end, you may feel increased confidence, lack of inhibition, and/or need less sleep as a result of rapid thoughts. Euphoria, happy feelings, and a general
increased pace of life are all typical. However, the manic behavior can evolve into a dangerous state—exhaustion from extreme hyperactivity, flight of ideas, poor judgment, and distraction are common symptoms of manic periods.

Everyone defines and evaluates emotional changes and fluctuations for themselves differently. Seeking a professional's opinion and advice can help distinguish between normal ups and downs and/or a condition that could be helped by therapy or medication. For tips on choosing the right kind of counselor to see, check out Types of Therapists [2] in the Go Ask Alice! Archive. Also check out How to Find a Therapist [3] for info on seeking a professional session.

Keep in mind that therapy or professional counsel isn't just for the depressed—seeing a professional can help you make heads and tails of many aspects of your life, no matter where you are at the present moment.

Alice!
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