**Bipolar & Anxiety**

**Introduction**

Anxiety can be a symptom of bipolar disorder. This was recognized by the fellow who originally described bipolar disorder as such, Dr. Emil Kraepelin, back in 1921. He described “anxious mania”, and also “excited depression”, which included a “great restlessness”. He specifically named anxiety as one of the components of this illness. All that requires saying, because “anxiety” is not generally regarded as a bipolar symptom. The International Society for Bipolar Disorders (ISBD) further strengthened the view that anxiety can be part of bipolar disorder in a Task Force report detailed below.

The International Society for Bipolar Disorders assembled committees of bipolar specialists to prepare reports on several aspects of bipolar diagnosis. Their paper was on “mixed states” in bipolar disorder, which is the primary setting in which anxiety makes sense as a bipolar symptom.

Reviewing briefly:

* General hyper-arousal
* Inner tension
* Irritability/impatience
* Agitation
* “Frantically anxious”

can be part of bipolar disorder. In fact, the ISBD report states that **anxiety is “a core symptom of mixed states”.**

**Two ways to have anxiety with bipolar disorder**

There are basically two ways you can have anxiety with bipolar disorder. First, it can be a symptom of the bipolar disorder itself.

Secondly, you can have a separate anxiety condition *in addition* to bipolar disorder. In medical lingo, that is called a “co-morbid” condition. It means both conditions are present, and thus implies that anxiety is a separate condition, not coming from the bipolar disorder itself.

These two ways of looking at anxiety have important implications. If the symptoms are coming from bipolar disorder itself, then they should get better when the bipolar disorder gets better. But if they are coming from a *separate* condition, they could persist even when the bipolar disorder improves.

If your anxiety is really a separate condition, it’s going to require a separate treatment. And that really complicates things, because very often the recommended treatment for the anxiety condition could be an antidepressant medication — and antidepressant medications can make bipolar disorder worse!

**Anxiety as a *symptom* of Bipolar Disorder**

What is the anxiety of bipolar disorder like? Patients describe it as “agitation”, and sometimes that is quite obvious: their foot bounces on the floor while we talk; they pick at their nails; sometimes they can’t even bear to sit still and will get up and pace around the office during our interview. But sometimes the agitation is only “inside”: patients experience “too much energy inside my skin”, like they’re going to “explode”, and usually their thoughts are going very fast (sometimes called “racing thoughts”). However, when this is severe, people may not experience that fast thinking, but instead just an extremely disorganized thinking — not being able to keep their mind on one thing for more than a few seconds, not being able to accomplish anything. Of course that can make “anxiety” worse as people recognize that they are really ill with something that is not obvious to anyone else, yet they are not really functioning either. How do you explain that to someone?

When this kind of anxiety is present with other manic symptoms like irritability, it can create an awful experience people feel desperate to get out of. (Very often they discover that alcohol can help settle this down for an hour or two. Unfortunately when it wears off, the symptoms come back, very often worse than before. If a person responds to that by drinking more, that can cause a worsening of the condition over several days or weeks — but because they get brief relief from drinking, they keep doing it and often have to drink more over time to keep their symptoms controlled. This is a dangerous spiral which is statistically associated with successful suicide attempts, so represents a clear reason to get help as soon as possible.)

Fortunately there are very good medication approaches to this which can help within an hour. [**Olanzapine/Zyprexa**](http://psycheducation.org/mood-spectrum-contents/treatment-contents/medications-contents/zyprexa-olanzapine/) has a special role here, in my view.

When this kind of anxiety is present with depression, this may be the worst combination of all. Anxiety is a very strong risk factor for suicide when people are depressed. The future looks hopeless and pointless because of the depression; and the present feels unbearable. Again, it’s important to know that this combination is very treatable.

**Anxiety as a separate condition**

Now we’ll have to be more specific about “what kind of anxiety are we talking about?”. There are several specific forms of anxiety which appear to be clearly separate from bipolar disorder (e.g. there are people with these conditions who clearly do not have any bipolar symptoms). Here’s a list, and then we’ll look at specific symptoms that identify each one. After that we’ll look at the treatment implications of having one of these. Jump to each by the link below.

* [**Generalized Anxiety Disorder**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#GAD) (GAD)
* [**Social Phobia**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#social)
* [**Panic Disorder**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#panic) (with or without Agoraphobia)
* [**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#PTSD) (PTSD)
* [**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#OCD) (OCD)
* [**Specific Phobias**](http://psycheducation.org/diagnosis/mixed-states/anxiety-and-bipolar-disorder/#simple)