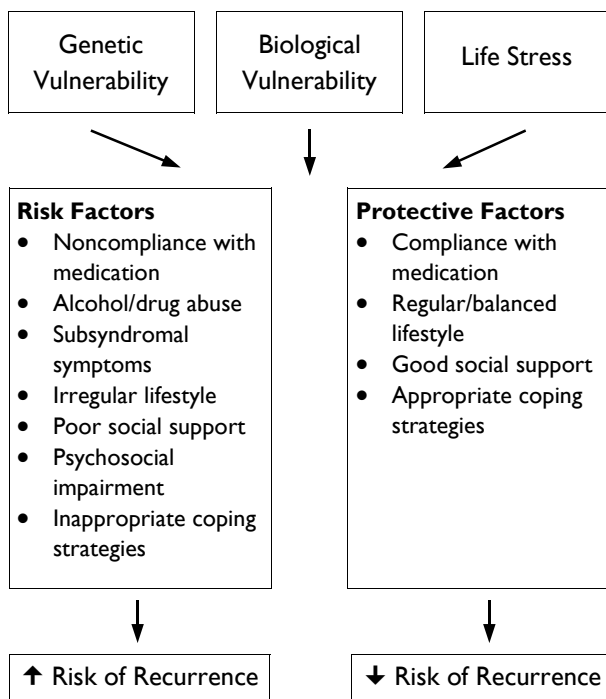


what causes bipolar disorder?

No one factor has been identified to cause bipolar disorder, that is, it is not caused by a person, event, or experience. There are a number of factors that interact with each other that may contribute to the development of this disorder in some people. In this handout, we present to you a way of understanding how all these factors come together to trigger the onset of this illness.

STRESS VULNERABILITY



First, we begin by looking at three key factors in this model, namely: genetic vulnerability, biological vulnerability and life stress.

Genetic Vulnerability

Bipolar disorder tends to run in families. First degree relatives of people with bipolar disorder have an increased risk of developing bipolar disorder. Children of bipolar patients face an 8% risk of getting the illness versus 1% in the population. Children of bipolar patients also face an increased risk (12%) of getting unipolar depression (i.e., depression only, without mania). Identical twins are also more likely to both develop this disorder than fraternal twins. While these results indicate to some extent that this disorder is genetically inherited, they also suggest that there are other factors that may contribute to its development.

Biological Vulnerability

This refers to possible biochemical imbalances in the brain that makes a person vulnerable to experiencing mood episodes. An imbalance of brain chemicals or an inability for them to function properly may lead to episodes of “high” or “low” moods.

Life Stress



Stressful events or circumstances in a person’s life, such as, family conflicts, employment difficulties, bereavement, or even positive events, such as getting married, having children, moving house, etc, can place extra demands on the person, leading to them feeling stressed, frustrated, anxious, sad, etc.

The occurrence of bipolar disorder can thus be explained as an interaction of the 3 above factors. A person who is genetically and/or biologically vulnerable may not necessarily develop bipolar disorder. These vulnerabilities are affected by how they cope with stressors in their life. For example, a person who has a family history of diabetes may not develop diabetes if they are careful with they eat and have enough exercise. This brings us to a discussion on protective and risk factors.

Protective & Risk Factors

A risk factor is something that will increase the chances of a person who is already vulnerable becoming ill. Examples of risk factors are: poor or maladaptive coping strategies, alcohol or drug use, irregular daily routines, interpersonal conflicts, stressful events, etc. Protective factors, on the other hand, are those that can help to prevent a vulnerable person from becoming ill. Protective factors include good coping strategies, good social support networks, effective communication and problem solving skills, etc. It is when the risk factors outweigh the protective factors, that the chances of developing the disorder are high. This principle applies when considering the risk of recurrence as well.



Course of Illness

While some patients may experience long periods of normal moods, most individuals with bipolar disorder will experience repeated manic and/or depressive episodes throughout their lifetime. The ratio of manic episodes to depressive episodes will vary from one individual to the next, as will the frequency of episodes. Some individuals may experience only two or three episodes in their lifetime while others may experience a rapid cycling pattern of four or more episodes of illness per year. Whatever the pattern, it is important that bipolar patients learn effective ways of managing their illness and preventing the recurrence of further episodes.

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