

Research explores the positives of bipolar

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The problems of living with bipolar have been well documented, but a new study by Lancaster University has captured the views of those who also report highly-valued, positive experiences of living with the condition.

Researchers at Lancaster's Spectrum Centre, which is dedicated to the study of [bipolar](#) disorder, interviewed and recorded their views of ten people with a bipolar diagnosis, aged between 24 and 57. Participants in the study reported a number of perceived benefits to the condition ranging from sharper senses to increased productivity.

The research was designed to explore growing evidence that some people with bipolar value their experiences and in some cases would prefer not to be without the condition.

Participants described a wide range of experiences and internal states that they believed they felt to a far greater intensity than those without the condition. These included increased perceptual sensitivity, creativity, focus and clarity of thought.

Some held (or had previously held) high functioning professional jobs or had been studying for higher level qualifications. They described in detail how they experienced times when tasks that are usually quite difficult or time consuming, would feel incredibly easy and the ability to achieve at a high level during these times was clearly immensely rewarding.

Others expressed the view that they felt ‘lucky’ or even ‘blessed’ to have the condition.

Alan, (not his real name) one of the interviewees, said: “It’s almost as if it opens up something in the brain that isn’t otherwise there, and I see colour much more vividly than I used to.....So I think that my access to music and art are something for which I’m grateful to bipolar for enhancing. It’s almost as if it’s a magnifying glass that sits between that and myself.”

Researchers even found some people with bipolar reaped positive experiences from their lows such as greater empathy with the suffering of others.

Dr Fiona Lobban, who led the study, said: “Bipolar Disorder is generally seen as a severe and enduring mental illness with serious negative consequences for the people with this diagnosis and their friends and family. For some people this is very much the case. Research shows that long term unemployment rates are high, relationships are marred by high levels of burden on family and friends and quality of life is often poor. High rates of drug and alcohol misuse are reported for people with this diagnosis and suicide rates are twenty times that of the general population.

“However, despite all these factors researchers and clinicians are aware that that some aspects of bipolar experiences are also highly valued by some people. We wanted to find out what these positive experiences were.

“People were very keen to take part in this study and express views which some felt had to be hidden from the medical profession.

“It is really important that we learn more about the positives of bipolar as

focusing only on negative aspects paints a very biased picture that perpetuates the view of bipolar as a wholly negative experience. If we fail to explore the positives of bipolar we also fail to understand the ambivalence of some people towards treatment.”

Rita Long from Stockport was not part of the study but can identify with its findings. She was 40 when she was diagnosed with the condition but from her school days she was aware that she experienced the world differently to her twin sister.

“We were making Christmas cakes at school and I was so interested and excited by it and my sister says she remembers watching me and thinking, ‘I really wish I could get that excited about making a Christmas cake’. I noticed things, experienced them with a different level of intensity, we’d be on a walk and I’d be saying look at the colour of this, and my sister would be saying, ‘It’s just a berry’. Socially too, people with bipolar can be quite quick witted, humorous. Until much later in life I just presumed those things were part of my personality.

“I don’t want to underestimate how difficult the bad times can be that some people go through with bipolar but at the same time I feel very passionate about the positives. If we are going to move on as a society - in academia, in business, in entertainment - we need people who will push boundaries. People with bipolar can do that.”

Bipolar Disorder is a two-edged sword: a qualitative study to understand the positive edge, Fiona Lobban, Katherine Taylor, Craig Murray and Steven Jones is published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

More information: [doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2012.03.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.03.001)

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