How Art Can Help Monitor Bipolar Symptoms
By Taylor Bourassa | Apr. 19, 2016


Being diagnosed with bipolar disorder may cause some people to feel worthless, hopeless and on edge. They may also experience an increase in stress, anxiety and depression as they go through this significant life change.

One way to deal with these feelings is to practice self-care through art, physical activity or relaxation. Self-care can play a large role in monitoring mood changes and symptoms and progressing on the journey of recovery.

Art As Self-Care

Art is an incredibly emancipating activity that helps with the release of pent-up emotions and may help someone to better understand these emotions. During manic episodes, art may be both a therapeutic tool and a tool to document certain activities.

Art can help people to look back and see how they were feeling, understand what triggered these feelings and determine ways to better monitor these episodes. For instance, with the use of art someone can see that spending time with a certain individual may have spurred a manic episode. This exercise can be done through art journaling, which is documenting the feelings and events that accompany the piece of art.

For a depressive episode, art can be used as a visual journal or reference that helps individuals better understand their behaviors and mindsets. By monitoring and visualizing negative behaviors experienced during manic or depressive episodes, people may be more aware of these behaviors and their onset and be better equipped to change these behaviors through behavior training.

Behavioral Effects

Noah Hass-Cohen and Richard Carr hypothesize in Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience that the repeated methods of making art and communicating with others through art could have positive effects similar to cognitive behavioral therapy in changing brain functions. With this knowledge individuals may be able to change their behavior leading up to these episodes. They may avoid certain people, activities and places that place them in a negative situation.

The idea that art can help people is based on its expressive nature and its role in emotional and stress release. From a scientific point of view, what happens in the brain when one participates in art may help explain why it is such a therapeutic activity.

Cathy Malchiodi claims, in her book, The Art Therapy Sourcebook, that art connects the mind and body, which can contribute to feelings of mastery and control. Noah Hass-Cohen and
Richard Carr indicate that this helps encourage self-expression and reduce the effects of stressors.

An important aspect of monitoring bipolar disorder, as pointed out by Caroline McNamee in Bilateral Art: A Creative Response to Advances in Neuroscience, is achieving stable mental states, which art can facilitate. Through artistic expression, one not only achieves a therapeutic release but also an understanding of their mental state, particularly related to an episode of mania or depression, and is better able to monitor and manage behaviors.