



Review article

Hypersexuality and couple relationships in bipolar disorder: A review



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ABSTRACT

Background: Although change in sexual behavior is recognized as an integral part of bipolar disorder, most of the relevant literature on sexual issues in patients with this illness concerns medication side effects and does not differentiate bipolar disorder from other serious mental disorders. Surprisingly, little has been published on mania-induced hypersexuality and the effects of mood cycling on couple relationships. In this review, we examine the extant literature on both of these subjects and propose a framework for future research.

Methods: A search of PsycINFO and PubMed was conducted using keywords pertaining to bipolar disorder, hypersexuality and couple relationships. A total of 27 articles were selected for review.

Results: Despite lack of uniformity in diagnosis of bipolar disorder and no formal definition of hypersexuality, the literature points to an increased incidence of risky sexual behaviors in bipolar patients during manic episodes compared to patients with other psychiatric diagnoses. Further, it appears that bipolar patients are more similar to healthy controls than to other psychiatric patients when it comes to establishing and maintaining couple relationships. Nonetheless, the studies that examined sexuality in couples with one bipolar partner found decreased levels of sexual satisfaction associated with the diagnosis, varying levels of sexual interest across polarities, increased incidence of sexual dysfunction during depressive episodes, and disparate levels of satisfaction in general between patients and their partners.

Limitations: Due to changes in diagnostic criteria over time, there is a lack of uniformity in the definition of bipolar disorder across studies. Hypersexuality is not systematically defined and therefore the construct was not consistent across studies. Some of the older articles date back more than 30 years, making them subject to the biases of sexual and gender norms that have since become outdated. Finally, the heterogeneity of the samples, which include patients with comorbid substance use as well as inpatient, outpatient, symptomatic and euthymic patients, may limit the generalizability of results.

Conclusions: Although bipolar patients experience disease-specific sexual problems of mania-induced hypersexuality and specific effects of mood cycling on couple relationships, the existing literature is mostly outdated and lacks a consistent definition of hypersexuality. Novel research is needed to address sexual symptomatology in bipolar disorder within the context of current sexual, cultural and gender norms.

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1. Introduction

Sexual problems in psychiatric patients are well documented in the literature; however, the majority of studies does not differentiate between diagnostic categories and instead collapse participants into a single group (Bossini et al., 2013; Labbate and Lare, 2001; Rizvi et al., 2011; Swan and Wilson, 1979; Wylie et al., 2002). Though in recent years there has been a surge in research articles delineating sexual difficulties specifically in patients with schizophrenia (Bushong et al., 2013; Kheng Yee et al., 2014; Malik et al., 2011), bipolar disorder has not received a commensurate level of attention. This is despite the fact that, with a lifetime prevalence of 3%, bipolar disorder afflicts more people in the U.S. than schizophrenia, which has a lifetime prevalence of 1% (Merikangas et al., 2007; NIMH, n.d.).

Many of the sexual difficulties associated with bipolar patients are common to all severe psychiatric disorders. These may include sexual dysfunction due to medications, increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and general neglect of sexual issues in treatment (Magidson et al., 2014; Segraves, 1989; Wright et al., 2007). However, two aspects of sexual health in bipolar disorder, namely hypersexuality and disruption of couple relationships due to mood cycling, are unique to bipolar disorder. Hypersexuality during manic and hypomanic episodes is one of the best-known symptoms of bipolar disorder. Likewise, the cycling of manic and depressive episodes is a hallmark of this diagnosis, and is associated with disruptive sexual fluctuations that may be stressful and difficult to manage for both the affected patient and their partner. Surprisingly, very little literature exists on either topics, and neither issue has been reviewed in the past. Further, even though hypersexuality is firmly tied to bipolar illness both in the professional and lay literature, the exact definition of this term with regard to this illness has not been established. This lack of definition is problematic as sexual norms are strongly dependent on culture and historical period, making it difficult to compare studies across different time periods or cultures.

The vast majority of evidence-based studies on hypersexuality and couple relationships look only at the risks associated with mania/hypomania induced “risky” sexual behaviors. Consequently, much of our understanding about sexual health in bipolar disorder derives from anecdotal clinical observations, older studies and case reports. Interestingly, although a fairly substantial literature exists on the relationships and marital issues of bipolar patients, even this line of research for the most part fails to look at sexual themes (Lesser, 1983; Rowe and Morris, 2012; Sheets and Miller, 2010; Vibha et al., 2013; Whisman, 2007).

Meanwhile, sexual health and sexual satisfaction remain integral to relationship satisfaction, treatment compliance, and overall quality of life (Byers, 2005; Laumann et al., 1999; Sprecher and Cate, 2004; Yeh et al., 2006; Zemishlany and Weizman, 2008). A better understanding of sexual health, specifically the impact of hypersexuality and mood cycling on bipolar clients and their partners would greatly help to inform treatment and improve outcome in this population.

The aim of this review is to compile the existing research on

hypersexuality and couple relationships in bipolar patients, with the intention of synthesizing extant findings and outlining a course for much-needed novel studies.

2. Methods

A literature search of PsycINFO and PubMed databases was conducted by three trained research assistants under the close supervision of the first author. English language articles published prior to June 2015 were reviewed. Using these computer-based extracting services, various combinations of the following terms were searched in all fields: (“bipolar disorder” OR “bipolar” OR “manic-depressed” OR “mania” OR “depression”) AND (“marriage” OR “partner” OR “spouse” OR “sexual dysfunction” OR “sexual” OR “sexuality”). The PubMed search was limited to articles pertaining to humans, to filter out articles that use the term “bipolar” but do not refer to the psychiatric disorder. A search using the terms “bipolar disorder” and “sex” was conducted but did not prove to be useful as it generated articles dealing with gender differences rather than sexuality. Articles that fit the topic and were cited in studies in the original literature search were also included. This search produced a total of 1431 publications. In an attempt to obtain LGBT data, a search was conducted using the terms (“bipolar” OR “manic”) AND (“homosexual” OR “gay” OR “lesbian”). Of note, several articles have been published in recent years that offered new insight into mental health and bipolar disorder within the LGBT community; unfortunately, none of them focused on the sexual health of bipolar patients specifically (Bolton and Sareen, 2011; Cochran and Mays, 2009; Guerim et al., 2015; Hellman et al., 2010; Herek and Garnets, 2007; McIntosh, 2012; Mizock et al., 2014; Pandya, 2014).

Of the 1405 articles excluded because they were deemed as either inapplicable or beyond the scope of this review: (i) 505 articles pertained to relationship problems but did not address sexuality, e.g. looked at marital distress due to symptoms, couples counseling, and caregiver burden; (ii) 378 articles addressed sexual difficulties in psychiatric patients but did not differentiate between bipolar disorder and other psychiatric disorders; (iii) 62 articles dealt with childhood sexual abuse or trauma, 60 articles explored sexual development in adolescent bipolar patients, 29 articles investigated bipolar disorder in sex offenders, and 41 articles focused on reproductive trends and; (iv) 193 articles pertained to medication side effects, as applicable to all diagnoses. After a general survey of thematic content and the addition of articles found through citations or peer recommendation, 27 articles were sorted into two groups: (i) Bipolar Disorder and Hypersexual Behavior, and (ii) Bipolar Disorder and Couple Relationships. A flowchart with further details on the literature search is shown in Fig. 1.

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