

Bipolar Strengths



Around 1 in 30 people suffer from bipolar disorder. This has made some scientists wonder: if bipolar is all bad, then why has it so common? One reason may be that the genes for bipolar are closely associated with genes for personal strengths. Researchers are finding that this is indeed the case. Not only do certain strengths occur more often in those with bipolar, they also are more common in their children (even in the children who don't develop bipolar).

Below are some of the personal strengths that are associated with bipolar. Your own strengths can get lost in an episode of depression, but finding them can help in your recovery. Think about what they are and let us know.

Source: Positive aspects of mental illness: a review in bipolar disorder. Galvez JF, Thommi S, Ghaemi SN. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. Feb 12, 2011;128(3):185-90.

Openness

This strength includes artistic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, creativity, love of variety, flexible thinking and non-judgmental attitudes. People with this strength are better at thinking outside the box and are more open to experiencing emotions. Although there is a common stereo-type that emotional or artistic people are more prone to depression, research has actually found the opposite: these types of strengths help people recover from depression.

Extroversion

Sociable, lively, warm, cheerful, assertive, active, excitement-seeking, emotionally expressive and frequent positive emotions. These strengths can help you build a wide net of social supports.

Intelligence and Leadership

People with bipolar tend to know more words and use them more expressively. Bipolar disorder is slightly more common among people with higher IQs. Creative problem-solving and leadership skills also travel closely with the genes for bipolar.

Resilience

People with bipolar disorder may have natural protections against trauma. They can often rise to the occasion in a crisis. They are also skilled at learning from trauma. When they encounter trauma a second time people with bipolar disorder recover faster than the rest of us.

Empathy and Realism

People with depression have a greater ability to see things accurately, including themselves. It turns out that most people have an inflated sense of their own talents or importance, but people who have been through depression have a more realistic view of themselves. Recovery from depression can also bring greater empathy for others. These two strengths are true for both non-bipolar and bipolar depression.

—Chris Aiken, MD, adapted from *Bipolar, Not So Much* (Aiken & Phelps, WW Norton, 2017)