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BIPOLAR DISORDER

A Short History of Bipolar Disorder

The concept of bipolar disorder is surprisingly modern.

Posted Jun 21, 2012



[Article updated on 7 September 2017]



Jean-Pierre Falret Source: Wikicommons

The terms used for the bipolar extremes, 'melancholy' ([depression](#)) and '[mania](#)' both have their origins in Ancient Greek. 'Melancholy' derives from *melas* 'black' and *chole* 'bile', because Hippocrates thought that depression resulted from an excess of black bile. 'Mania' is related to *menos* 'spirit, force, passion'; *mainesthai* 'to [rage](#), go mad'; and *mantis* 'seer', and ultimately derives from the Indo-European root *men-* 'mind' to which, interestingly, 'man' is also sometimes connected. ('Depression', the clinical term for melancholy, is much more recent in origin and derives from the Latin *deprimere* 'press down' or 'sink down'.)

The idea of a relationship between melancholy and mania can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks, and particularly to Aretaeus of Cappadocia, who was a physician and philosopher in the time of Nero or Vespasian (first century AD). Aretaeus described a group of patients who would 'laugh, play, dance night and day, and sometimes go openly to the market crowned, as if victors in some contest of skill' only to be 'torpid, dull, and sorrowful' at other times. Although he suggested that both patterns of

behaviour resulted from one and the same disorder, this idea did not gain currency until the modern era.

The modern [psychiatric](#) concept of [bipolar disorder](#) has its origins in the nineteenth century. In 1854, Jules Baillarger (1809–1890) and Jean-Pierre Falret (1794–1870) independently presented descriptions of the disorder to the Académie de Médecine in Paris. Baillarger called the illness *folie à double forme* ('dual-form insanity') whereas Falret called it *folie circulaire* ('circular insanity'). Falret observed that the disorder clustered in families, and correctly postulated that it had a strong genetic basis.

In the early 1900s the eminent German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1856–1926) studied the natural course of the untreated disorder and found it to be punctuated by relatively symptom-free intervals. On this basis he distinguished the disorder from *démence précoce* ([schizophrenia](#)) and coined the term 'manic–depressive [psychosis](#)' to describe it. Kraepelin emphasized that, in contrast to *démence précoce*, manic–depressive

... feature of the disorder.

The terms 'manic-depressive illness' and 'bipolar disorder' are comparatively recent, and date back from the 1950s and 1980s respectively. The term 'bipolar disorder' (or 'bipolar affective disorder') is thought to be less stigmatizing than the older term 'manic-depressive illness', and so the former has largely superseded the latter. However, some psychiatrists and some people with bipolar disorder still prefer the term 'manic-depressive illness' because they feel that it reflects the nature of the disorder more accurately.

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Neel Burton is author of [The Meaning of Madness](#) and other books.



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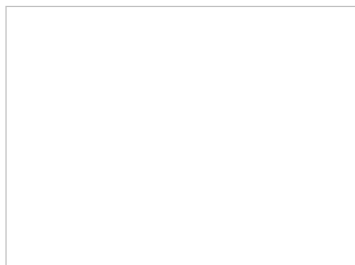
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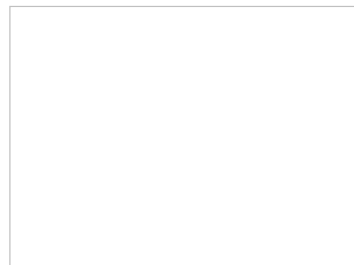
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