



## **Your Mental Health: Understanding and treating mood swings**

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My primary function as a therapist at Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare is assessing individuals for our services. Therefore, I see several hundred people annually, asking questions, reviewing documents and collaborating with them to develop a sense of what challenges they're experiencing and what treatment options are available. Many of these people report that the primary issue they're struggling with is rapid mood swings.

These mood swings usually take place many times daily and sometimes several times hourly. They cause discomfort in people's lives and often affect their relationships. They also may affect their employment or schooling or other roles they have. This seems to be spread fairly evenly across age, gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic groups.

Many people equate these mood swings with bipolar disorder, which it is not. Mood swings in a true bipolar disorder aren't nearly as rapid. Another indicator of bipolar disorder is the lack of connection between a person's mood and his environment. While a mood swing may start as a result of a stressor, it is not necessarily dependent on the environment. With people experiencing these rapid mood swings, it seems as though exactly the opposite is the case.

My experience in working with people reporting rapid and dramatic mood swings is that their mood swings almost always are directly related to their reactions to their environments. If something depressing occurs, they become immediately depressed. If something is frustrating, they quickly become angry. This is repeated over and over.

In addition, these emotional reactions usually are extreme. The person does not merely get depressed but may become

depressed to the point of contemplating suicide and, in some instances, acting on these thoughts.

Or they may become angry to the point of becoming violent and harming others or destroying property. Again, these extremes almost always are a reaction to something that happened, something someone said or did or some other stressors in their lives.

There is treatment for these mood swings and people are able to learn to control them. Cognitive therapy is very effective in assisting individuals with learning how to deal with their emotions. One of the key aspects of this is learning that your thinking controls your emotions and behaviors. Many people believe the opposite is true, that your emotions control your thinking and behavior.

When a situation occurs in anyone's life, the first thing that happens is their brain scans their memory for related information, such as similar situations that have happened in the past. This scan takes place in milliseconds.

Based on this information, the brain forms thoughts. In other words, it attaches meaning to the situation. It is the meaning that's given to the situation that creates the emotion associated with the situation. We have all experienced situations in which we had a fairly significant emotional reaction to a situation while someone else had little reaction or seemed to not care at all. This is due to the different meanings attached to that situation.

With cognitive therapy, the individual can learn how to manage his thoughts and therefore develop improved emotional responses. In many cases, one technique is creating secondary thoughts

that challenge the original thought. For instance, if the original thought is "this has happened several times before and the outcome is always bad," the challenging thoughts can be: Is this actually the same as past instances? Did something bad always happen? Is there anything I can do to change this?

Another cognitive technique that's useful is challenging the mood. In these cases, it's helpful to identify the actual mood you're creating. For example, am I really mad or am I actually frustrated? In challenging the mood, you also can address the meaning creating the mood with questions such as: Is this worth getting mad over? How important is this?

One other important aspect of cognitive therapy used to address these mood swings is challenging the behaviors that occur as a result of the meaning attached to situations and the feelings created. People can learn to look at what consequences/rewards may come out of their behaviors. In other words, think the situation through: "If I do this, what will happen next?"

As they look at possible risky behaviors, they're then able to go back and challenge their thoughts, mood and meaning and develop more appropriate emotional and behavioral responses to situations.

These are some techniques that can be useful in improving one's control over his emotions. Obviously, therapy is more involved and is developed with each individual taking into account the situations and circumstances. However, the key thing to remember is that your thinking controls your emotions. No person, place or thing can make you feel anything, so stop and think!