

The link between depression and criminal behavior



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Depression is a wide-reaching condition that affects millions of Americans who experience it in a few different archetypes, but each can be crippling. Bipolar disorder, a severe type of depression, has been connected to criminal behavior when one considers prison-population statistics and the percentage of manic depressives who commit crimes. Factors such as substance abuse, environment, and gender unpack the criminal side of depression and lead to the ultimate question of whether depression lends itself to crime or vice versa.

What is depression? Depression is described as an illness that affects every aspect of a human being. The way a person eats, sleeps, and feels about life is typical of depression. One can also characterize depression by what it is not. For example, depression is not simply a blue feeling that comes and goes. We all experience sadness from time to time, but depression is a very deep feeling of sadness that does not go away by wish or will. One does not “get over” or “shake off” depression. It is also not a sign of weak or flawed character. How does one characterize this deep feeling of sadness? A more correct term used when describing depression is illness. The term illness insinuates that, without treatment, symptoms can last for a significant length of time. The longevity of symptoms differentiates occasional sadness from clinical depression. Strock, (1994). Depression (NIH publication no. 00-3561). This point is addressed by the VA,

For many, a depressed mood is a normal reaction to the death of someone they love or the loss of the ability to perform routine activities. But, when a depressed mood persists for a long period of time with no signs of lifting, a person will benefit most from talking to their primary care provider to

determine if clinical depression is the cause. (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2002)

There is, however, treatment available that can help individuals regardless of the degree of symptoms.

Types of Depression

The three main types of depression are major depression, dysthymia, and bipolar disorder. There are many other types of depression besides the three listed, however, the variances are more of degree than nature. For all practical purposes, the three main types of depression encompass the entire spectrum. The first type, major depression, virtually disables a person in every aspect of his or her life. Menial tasks such as eating or sleeping are just as affected by major depression as harder tasks, such as social interaction and cognitive functioning. In addition, people suffering from major depression do not enjoy activities that were once pleasurable. This disabling of function in every aspect of life typifies major depression. Strock, (1994). Depression (NIH publication no. 00-3561).

The second main type of depression is dysthymia. This type of depression is less severe than major depression in that it does not disable. The hallmark of dysthymia is that it keeps a person from having a feeling of wholeness or “good.” People who have dysthymia, however, are not completely safe from the effects of major depression, as it is common to suffer from major depression at some point in one’s life. Strock, (1994). Depression (NIH publication no. 00-3561).

Bipolar Disorder, also labeled manic depression, is the third type of depression that is the least common and most severe form of the illness. Bipolar disorder is characterized by cycling mood changes: severe highs (mania) and lows (depression). The shift between these two moods is often gradual, but can also happen abruptly with no notice. The depressed aspect of Bipolar Disorder is virtually the same as major depression. The person loses interest in activities, whether routine or pleasurable and feels a deep sense of sadness. The mania aspect of this illness is what differentiates it from the other forms of depression. When a manic depressed person has fits of mania, he or she has a heightened energy level that is well above normal. The person may talk more than usual or react in a way that is inappropriate to the situation. While in a state of mania, a manic depressed person may do things that are a cause for shame or embarrassment later, but in the moment, they may seem perfectly "right". If left untreated, manic depression may lead to a psychotic state. Strock, (1994). Depression (NIH publication no. 00-3561). This is the type of depression that can lead to criminal behavior.

Link to Criminal Behavior

Of the three types of depression, bipolar disorder is most commonly linked to criminal behavior, especially violence. In a study that considered a cross section of 261 patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder, it was found that when compared to criminal records, manic-depressives were more often convicted of crimes (Englander, 2003). However, those who were unipolar (only depressive, not manic) were found not to be more prone to criminal behavior. This leads one to focus on the manic aspect of depression in

<https://assignbuster.com/the-link-between-depression-and-criminal-behavior/>

connecting the dots to an increased propensity to commit crimes. A study of 50 juvenile boys corroborated this notion by noting that manic depression not only increased criminal behavior, but also was linked to antisocial tendencies. Though a high level of aggression was identified, only 14% were ever incarcerated for aggressive acts (Englander, 2003).

Prevalence of Mania in Prisons

A look at criminal behavior within the construct of mania leads to an obvious question of whether individuals within the prison system are more likely or less likely to exhibit manic tendencies. A study completed in the mid-1980s evaluated over 1, 000 prisoners in the HMP Brixton in London, England and found that prisoners were seven times more likely to suffer from manic depression when compared to the general population (Blumenthal and Lavendar, 2000). Other mental illnesses were found less frequently. Schizophrenia was discovered to exist only three times higher in the prison sample than in the general populace.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Risk Factors

Alcohol and drug abuse are key indicators in determining whether someone is prone to criminal acts. It is helpful, once again, to compare bipolar disorder to schizophrenia, this time in terms of sufferer usage. There is a high rate of substance abuse among mentally ill persons across the spectrum of mental illness. In fact, mental illness doubles the risk of substance abuse.

Schizophrenics abuse drugs and alcohol at a rate of 47%, while manic depressives abuse at a much higher rate of 61% (Blumenthal and Lavendar, 2000). General substance abuse frequency among manics coupled with the <https://assignbuster.com/the-link-between-depression-and-criminal-behavior/>

notion that a majority of violent crimes such as rape, assault, and murder are committed after high drug or alcohol use shows that those who suffer from bipolar disorder are more likely to commit violent crime (Blumenthal and Lavendar, 2000). Thus, substance abuse is a predictor of violence and manic depressives are prone to substance abuse.

Gender Considerations

It is interesting to look at gender differences as it relates to bipolar disorder. Women generally suffer from depression more often than men, and this is also true in the bipolar aspect of depression. Along with frequency, women suffer from more intense forms of depression than men, meaning mania could be potentially more severe and lead to violence or other forms of criminal behavior. This, however, is outweighed by the significantly higher prevalence of male arrests within the context of a manic state. In the U. S., men commit more crimes per capita, up to six times more than women. Even though women are less likely to commit crimes than men, those who suffer from bipolar disorder offend at a higher rate than women who are not diagnosed with mental illness (Friedman, 2005).

Causal Relationship Question

Though there is a relationship found between depression and crime, some argument exists as to the extent of the connection. Two possibilities must be considered, whether the crime was committed because the individual was depressed or did the person become depressed as a result of committing a crime. One of the more closely linked facets of depression and violent crime are found when a depressed person becomes so hopeless that, before

committing suicide, they kill friends or loved ones. In a study of 78 murder cases, a link was made between depression and violent crime only when environmental factors, such as a negative life event, spurred on the criminal behavior (Hollin, 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, depression is a vast subject of which much is known. Types of depression have ranges of degree from relatively mild to very severe forms of the disorder. In terms of criminal behavior, bipolar disorder is most closely linked, particularly the manic aspect of the mental illness. A relationship is seen when one considers the higher prevalence of bipolar criminals in the prison system compared to the general populace and the propensity for manic depressives to abuse alcohol and drugs, a key indicator of criminal behavior. Though the causation of criminal behavior is akin to the chicken and egg argument, questioning which one causes the other, it is proven that depression is a factor in the context of criminal behavior.