

Bipolar Disorder and Neurofeedback

If you have been diagnosed with, or believe you may have, bipolar disorder, you understand the unpredictable mood swings, the rapid cycling of emotions, the difficulty focusing, and the impulsive behavior you can't always control. You know the pain of damaged relationships, work or school challenges, and the feeling that you can never quite relax or feel comfortable.

How Can Neurofeedback Help?

Neurofeedback training helps strengthen the brain and supports it to more easily maintain a stable state. By exercising your brain in a certain way, your brain learns to better regulate itself. Better regulation means better emotional control, healthier reactions, and more balance with less effort.

Clients we've seen at Affective NeuroSciences who have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder report less susceptibility to mood swings, increased ability to focus, decreased anger, and the feeling that they can trust their brains to respond appropriately again.

One client of ours had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, had significantly reduced her alcohol consumption, and was trying to reduce her medication as well. She was extremely anxious and was unable to function well in her life.

After the very first minute of her first neurofeedback session, she stated she was starting to feel more relaxed. After 20 minutes, she said, "I can't believe how calm I am." Over time, she was able to much more easily manage her bipolar symptoms. This is not atypical. The neurofeedback technology allowed her brain to find a more stable point, and with consistent training, her brain has settled into a more steady pattern.

Research has shown that neurofeedback training can help those with bipolar disorder function more easily by decreasing their symptoms as the brain rewires itself in a more healthy, positive, and stable way.

One researcher, Ed Hamlin, a neuropsychologist at the Pisgah Institute in North Carolina, has seen significant improvement in an ongoing study with over 40 patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Many of these patients had been repeatedly hospitalized, often once or more a year.

After receiving a series of neurofeedback training, the patients were able to reduce medications, and some patients who had been on medications for 20 years were able to become medication-free.

The patients in this study reported increased independence, better ability to control themselves, improved relationships, better performance and functioning at work and school, and a dramatic reduction in hospitalizations. Those patients that remained on medication at reduced levels stated they felt much better and no longer had the “flat” feeling medication can induce.

While we have seen many clients diagnosed with bipolar, and there is significant anecdotal clinical information, published scientific research is still limited. We are optimistic that more published research will be added to the field of neurofeedback soon.

Bipolar Disorder and Medications



While medications can, and often do, have a useful role in helping people suffering from the symptoms of bipolar disorder, there are drawbacks to them as well. Not only does the trial and error phase take weeks to determine whether a particular medication works, some people don't respond or tolerate them well, and there can be unpleasant side effects that can lead to additional medications or discontinued use.

The longer medications are used, the more risks involved. Many people develop tolerances to medications leading to increased dosages or necessary switches to alternate medications that again, may or may not have the desired effect and require a trial and error period. Because the brain becomes reliant on the medications, it never has the chance to learn to cope or to regulate itself.

For many people with bipolar disorder, reducing medication is important due to the unpleasant side effects and the lack of feeling like themselves. At Affective NeuroSciences, we work carefully with our clients' doctors regarding medication reduction. We do not recommend clients reduce or stop their medication without their doctor's supervision. As an alternative to drugs, neurofeedback increases the brain's stability, and many doctors are willing to help patients safely taper off their medication as their brains become more even.

What Happens In Neurofeedback Training?

At Affective NeuroSciences, we do a detailed initial assessment and recommend the neurofeedback protocols most effective for your particular symptoms. Neurofeedback sessions engage your brain through various types of games to help it learn to become more stable and balanced.

Neurofeedback is exercise for the brain, and like any exercise, multiple sessions are usually required to get solid results. The amount of sessions differs from person to person. We cannot state ahead of time how long the process will take.

Helping bipolar symptoms resolve requires a skilled clinician. The brains of people diagnosed with bipolar disorder can be sensitive, and it takes time, effort, and consistency to achieve stable results. The brain training exercises are constantly fine-tuned, and your progress is regularly assessed to maximize your brain's learning ability in every session.

Once the brain is strong, balanced, and reliably more even, clients can often stop brain training sessions or just come in for an occasional maintenance session.

What Do You Do Now?

Call us at 406 752 6634 to discuss your situation or to schedule an appointment.