

Is it depression, ADHD or bipolar disorder?

The symptoms can overlap, so it's important to find the right treatment, says one OSF provider

[Lavender Zarraga, APRN](#), a behavioral health provider at OSF HealthCare, says it's not uncommon for her patients to ask for a medication that isn't the right fit.

The culprit? She says symptoms of common mental health issues like depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and bipolar disorder can overlap. So, it's important to stay in contact with your provider to make sure you're on the best treatment plan.

On depression mimicking ADHD: "You have changed executive functioning. You can't decide. You feel dull. You can't concentrate," Zarraga says. "You have a hard time learning new things. You can't remember things or forget things easily. Attention and concentration are low. You think 'Why am I processing everything so slow?'"

Zarraga adds that she's seen people with depression take prescribed medicine and feel better, but then residual symptoms that mimic ADHD creep in. And, she says, ADHD can seem like bipolar disorder.

"If you start somebody on an antidepressant and they have an underlying bipolar disorder that they have not been diagnosed with, that can trigger mood symptoms. It could potentially trigger mania [a high energy period where high-risk behaviors can occur]," Zarraga says.

It's a lot to sort out, and it may make the person feel like they have a whole new set of problems.

"Talk to a provider. See what's going on," Zarraga says to people in that situation, noting that kids should not have to carry these issues into adulthood.

"There's a lot of talking involved," she adds. "Let's start from the beginning. Let's go back to your childhood. How were you doing then? And we relate that to how you are now."

From there, Zarraga says treatment could include more counseling or different medication. She says medicine for children is more straightforward. But for adults, a provider will make sure the pill isn't impacting the rest of the person's body.

There are also science-backed written tests that can help diagnose someone with ADHD. Questions along the lines of: Can you sit still in class? Does your mind wander all the time?

And a word for caregivers, friends and family members: watch for symptoms of these disorders in your loved ones and have a conversation, if needed. Don't ignore things, Zarraga says.

"There's nothing wrong with just talking about it. It's not going to hurt anybody to discuss it," she says, noting that society is now more accepting of mental health issues.

Signs to watch for in your close companion: irritability, aggression, anxiety and trouble sleeping. If you or someone you know needs to talk to a professional quickly, the national [suicide and crisis lifeline](#) is 9-8-8. And the [OSF HealthCare website](#) lists other resources.