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Depictions of Mental Illness:

Ian Gallagher in *Shameless*

Mental Illness is quickly gaining prevalence in popular media. Especially within the last decade, awareness of and resources for mental illness have been made drastically more popular and accessible. With the rise of social media, people that struggle with mental illness have been able to share their stories and raise awareness for the cause. As a result, popular media like films and television have begun to pick up on this and incorporate mental illness into their productions. Whether for better or for worse, mental illness is gaining a larger spotlight than ever before, thanks to popular media. One of the more popular instances of this is Ian Gallagher's diagnosis of Bipolar I in Showtime's *Shameless*. Though not the main focus of the show, viewers observe Ian's growth from prepubescence into adulthood, as well as his development of Bipolar I, over the course of eleven seasons. However, for the purpose of this analysis, seasons four and five are the most significant. Viewers of *Shameless* get to see all sides of Ian Gallagher, including his home/family environment, social relationships, work environment(s), and personal life. Ian Gallagher, from Showtime's *Shameless*, is an arguably accurate portrayal of the development and manifestation of Bipolar I Disorder, with psychotic features and potentially rapid cycling.

First and foremost, an explanation of Bipolar I Disorder seems necessary. Bipolar Disorder is characterized by drastic mood swings, called episodes, with each episode lasting several days. The mood swings are often cyclical and involve highs and lows, known respectively as 'manic' and 'depressive.' Between Bipolar I and Bipolar II, there are three distinct episodes: Manic episodes, hypomanic episodes, and major depressive episodes. Manic episodes (or "Mania") are

characterized by a period of abnormally elated mood, self-esteem, energy, distractibility, and reckless behavior, and a decreased need for sleep. These traits will likely pair with psychotic symptoms, including paranoia and/or delusions, and can often lead to hospitalization or detainment (Cicarelli, 2014). A hypomanic episode consists of the same symptoms, though often with far less severity, a shortened duration, and usually with the absence of psychosis. On the other hand, depressive episodes are typically characterized by depressed mood, decreased pleasure in activities, insomnia/hypersomnia, increased irritability, feelings of worthlessness, and recurrent thoughts of death (Ciccarelli, 2014).

Though both Bipolar I and Bipolar II involve only these three episodes, they have distinct differences. For Bipolar I, the only diagnostic requirement is at least one manic episode, while Bipolar II requires at least one hypomanic/manic episode and one depressive episode to warrant diagnosis. Despite the lack of necessity for a Bipolar I diagnosis, it's still not uncommon for patients to experience a depressive episode. In the United States, Bipolar I has ~0.06% prevalence and has an almost equal possibility of development in either sex. Though onset occurs most commonly in early adulthood (around 18 years of age), Bipolar I has been known to manifest at any time throughout the life cycle (Cicarelli, 2014).

Ian Gallagher displays more than enough symptoms to warrant a diagnosis of Bipolar I Disorder. Ian is an intelligent person who excelled in school and in JROTC, a junior military program. He is the third youngest of six children and is cared for by his eldest sister, Fiona, because his mother is absent, and his father is a drunk. The family lives in Chicago, Illinois, in what they refer to as 'the ghetto.' The Gallaghers consistently struggle to make ends meet and regularly deal with dangerous individuals and violent crime (Abbot et al., 2011-2021). Ian is sixteen in season four, and seventeen in season five. During season four, after a mysterious absence, Ian

returns and viewers learn that not only had he impulsively joined the army (illegally, as he lied about his age), but he is also absent without official leave (AWOL). However, he did not come back on his own; his boyfriend, Mickey, finds him doing sex work at a gay club far from their hometown and brings him home. At the end of season four, viewers watch as Mickey tries and fails to get Ian out of bed. Even when his sister (Fiona) is called, Ian only reacts aggressively and demands to be left alone (Abbot et al., 2014). Season four ends with the beginning of Ian's depressive episode, then season five begins with the end of it.

Additionally, Ian goes on to demonstrate all of the symptoms for a manic episode throughout the first several episodes of season five. Viewers witness Ian's decreased need for sleep, reckless/impulsive behavior (cocaine use, cheating on partner), constant activity, great mood, hypersexuality (constant flirting, resuming sex work), and grandiose ideals, as well as refusal to admit that he needs to see a doctor. His partner and siblings notice the drastic change in behavior but are unable to convince Ian to seek help. In addition to cocaine use, sex work, elated mood and constant activity, Ian also begins stealing suitcases from the airport and stages an exposé in which a homophobic priest is revealed to have had oral sex with another man. Continued success in his dangerous endeavors only increases his grandiose self-perception (Abbot et al., 2015).

In episode five, Mickey finally admits that Ian needs help and tries to take him to a hospital. In response, Ian flees with Yevgeny (infant son of Mickey and Svetlana, a sex worker he impregnated and was forced to marry). After taking a car and driving away with the baby, Ian's symptoms quickly devolve into psychosis as he is observed talking to and seemingly having full conversations with the infant. He's in a great mood and feels unstoppable. However, it all comes to a head when Yevgeny starts to require care such as a new diaper and food, and Ian

cannot provide. At a gas station, a woman offers to pay for diapers, to which Ian gratefully

accepts, but then begins to change Yevgeny on the cashier's counter and is asked to leave. In an

effort to make more money, he leaves Yevgeny in a car while he performs sexual favors for

strangers. During this time, a woman sees Yevgeny alone in the car and calls the police. When

they arrive, Ian again flees with Yevgeny, screaming that they're 'demons' after him and trying

to steal his baby. He's finally caught and captured, and Mickey and the other Gallaghers are

called to come get him. It's at this point that Ian is finally admitted to the psychiatric facility

back in Chicago to be treated for Bipolar I Disorder (Abbot et al., 2015).

There are several factors that play into the development of Bipolar I Disorder. Some of

the main factors include biological, social, and emotional or cognitive processes. One of the most

widely accepted 'causes' of Bipolar I is biological: genetic predisposition. Research has shown

that individuals with family members who have Bipolar I are ~10x more likely to develop the

disorder at some point in their lives. Additionally, the closer in genetics the diagnosed person is

to them, the more likely the individual is to have it. Ian Gallagher's mother, Monica Gallagher,

also has Bipolar (though whether it's I or II is unclear). Social factors also play a massive role in

the development of Bipolar I. If an individual has an unstable home life, especially one in which

circumstances range from being awful to fine to amazing, they may be more likely to reflect that

pattern in their psyche. This, paired with any traumatic experiences an individual may experience

over the course of their childhood/lifetime, may also contribute to the likelihood of the disorder's

onset. Repeated or continued instability/traumatic events may worsen the severity and/or quicken

the onset. Ian grew up in an unstable home environment and experienced several traumatic

instances both alone and with his family.

The emotional and cognitive processes, though significant in effecting onset, are typically more significant after the first manifestation of symptoms or episode. People with Bipolar Disorder often don't recognize that there's anything wrong or abnormal, especially when in a manic or hypomanic episode. They may even respond aggressively to offers of help, believing that the person is trying to somehow inhibit them. Because of this, management and treatment can be difficult, especially if the individual has few/no close loved ones that are willing to help them. For people with Bipolar I, the realizations of 'it's getting bad again' are few and far between. In season five (episode one), while out on a run with Fiona, she asks if Ian has been to see the doctor, to which he replies that he hasn't because he's 'all better' and 'fine' and that he'd only been 'messed up' because of his previous cocaine use (Abbot et al., 2015).

Showtime's *Shameless* seems to have accurately portrayed an individual with Bipolar I Disorder. Ian meets every criterion for a manic episode and therefore all criteria for a Bipolar I diagnosis. In addition, with his genetics and circumstances, this diagnosis also makes sense. Such an accurate portrayal of mental illness is, unfortunately, a somewhat rare occurrence. Especially with a fairly controversial disorder such as Bipolar, it's easy for popular media to misconstrue symptoms and character behavior. Typically, when people think of Bipolar or have a bipolar character, the type of behavior that comes to mind involves rapid mood swings, such as jumping from laughter to crying to explosive anger in a matter of minutes. This, of course, is inaccurate and does not even begin to provide a realistic portrayal of bipolar disorders. *Shameless* expertly avoids these misconceptions by having done actual research into the causes.

To conclude, Ian Gallagher, from Showtime's *Shameless*, is an accurate portrayal of the development and manifestation of Bipolar I Disorder, with psychotic features and potentially rapid cycling. Though most of his depressive episode is 'off screen,' he regularly and

realistically meets the criteria for a manic episode and a diagnosis of Bipolar I. In addition to his behavioral symptoms, his upbringing and genetics also add realism to his diagnosis by being in line with what official psychology guides (like the DSM 5) explain. Based on his behavior, paired with biological, social, and cognitive factors, Ian's diagnosis and portrayal of Bipolar I Disorder in *Shameless* is both accurate and realistic.

References

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