Bipolar Disorder: Kurt Cobain’s Case

Bipolar II disorder is a variation of bipolar spectrum disorder; a neurological disease that causes symptoms such as mood swings, anxiety, deep sadness, euphoria, general discontent, guilt, hopelessness, or loss of interest or pleasure in activities. Bipolar disorder is one of the most distinct syndromes in psychiatry and has been described in numerous cultures over the course of history. The diagnosis of bipolar spectrum disorder is almost completely attributed to biological factors. Whether this may be that the disorder was passed onto them hereditarily, or that they had an incident that caused a chemical or hormonal balance in their brain or body. Two components within Bipolar II disorder are mania and depression (Macqueen, Glenda M., and L. Trevor Young, 2001, p. 359.) Some symptoms of mania include poor judgement, euphoria or irritable mood, racing thoughts, and aggressive activity. Whereas, some symptoms of depression include feelings of worthlessness, suicidal thoughts, reduced appetite, weight loss, poor concentration, and insomnia. Also, panic disorder and suicide are strongly related to bipolar disorder as a whole and add room for explanation in regards to the unexplained suicides of those around us (Dilsaver, Steven C., et al., 1997, p. 48.)

Rock legend Kurt Cobain was born on February 20th, 1967 and took his own life at the age of twenty-seven on April 5th, 1994. A happy, normal, life is what Cobain seemed to have until his parents got divorced when he was nine years old. He then bounced between the houses of various relatives, sleeping underneath bridges, or under the roofs of friends’ parents. Cobain sought comfort in his artistic abilities and once he discovered the realm of punk rock music, his whole life shifted. He formed the band Nirvana with Krist Novoselic, the drummer of the Melvins, and recorded various demo tapes with a group of drummers that they recruited. As they travelled throughout the Northwest playing small shows, one of their demo tapes made its way to the hands of Jonathan Poneman, one of the head honchos at Sub Pop records who then signed the band. The band went on to work with amazing record labels and became the first alternative-rock band to gain such an immense popularity amongst such a mainstream audience. With Cobain as the lead singer, he became an icon of Generation X.

However, a great majority of Cobain’s life leading up to his death still remains untalked about. Cobain talked of suicide throughout much of his life and was diagnosed at a young age with ADD, bipolar II disorder, and manic depression. He constantly spoke of suicide and wrote “I hate myself, I want to die” in his journals. He used his journals, art, stories, and music to express his emotional pain. His behavior consisted of typical maladaptive actions and mood swings that eventually resulted in the taking of his own life. In regards to suicide, bipolar disorder in general is associated with the most frequent rates of suicide attempts compared to any other psychatric disorder (Oquendo, Maria A, et al., 2000, p. 107.) Rage and mood swings were the most obvious forms of bipolar II disorder that I, as well as the rest of society, picked up on throughout Cobain’s years of life. In his suicide note he wrote ‘I’m too much of an erratic, moody baby! I don’t have the passion anymore, and so remember, it’s better to burn out than to fade away.’ He would not hide the fact that there was something off with his outlook on life and his mood swings. I found that his suicide note offered great insight to what pain he was really feeling. Within the note he goes on to discuss things like the guilt he feels/felt in the sense that he could not experience his performances and his roaring crowds with the passion that other music artists felt, such as Freddie Mercury (Suicide Note, 1994.)

Keeping in mind the biopsychosocial approach, there are many factors in Cobain's life that could explain the catalysts towards the onset of his disorders, although his psychological disorders are mainly attributed to genetics. Not only was there a history of substance abuse in his family, but there was also a history of violence and suicide as well (Bipolar Lives, 2019, p.1). If Cobain was already genetically predisposed to having these types of behaviors, then his substance abuse problems and wild lifestyle added fuel to the fire of his already developing disorders. Ever since his parents divorce, Cobain became emotionally shattered and anti-social. He developed a negative self image, feeling as though he was unwanted and worthless as he was basically living couch to couch and sometimes even going homeless. This is evident in that his mantra was known as "I hate myself, I want to die." Finally, looking at his social relationships, it is easy to tell what lead him to act on his negative thoughts and emotions. As mentioned before, a lot of his rage and hatred towards people developed at a young age and only progressed as he got older. In interviews he avoids answering certain questions or only answers them in a bland monotone voice, showing that he clearly doesn't care. Also, in interviews he mentions numerous times his dislike for mankind and how he thinks a great majority of people are just assholes. His excessive drug use only led to more negative thoughts. Having his drug addict rockstar wife, Courtney Love, acting as an enabler to Cobain's addictions contributed heavily to this. His relationship with Love was very toxic. Cobain would act especially moody towards Love until she would give in and let him do drugs. He would use her as a personal nurse to take care of him when he was on the verge of overdosing. She would be there to slap him in the face, drop ice cubes down his back, and "stick pins in his balls", so that he would wake up. Also, there was an instance where Cobain and Love got into a physical fight over Cobain's guns, this fight caused such a commotion that the police were called to handle the situation. Also, his negative view towards the recording industry stimulated a lot of his rage, thus resulting in Cobain taking it out on the stage sets and not cooperating with interviewers.

In regards to the treatment of bipolar II disorder, antidepressant medication is very controversial. People often try to treat themselves and numb the emotional burdens that they feel. In Kurt Cobain's case, drugs were his escape. Much more efficient sources of treatment for Cobain in regards to medication in the form of good drugs would've been, antidepressants, antipsychotic medication, and serotonin. Fluoxetine is a form of serotonin and has been found to be both safe and effective. It is effective amongst those who experience short-term treatment due to depressive episodes, and it effective among those who experience relapses. Therapeutic options that would assist in the treatment process include psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychoeducation. I believe that Cobain and those around him were too caught up in the world of drugs, fame, and music, to go in search of help until it was too late. The types of people that would've been extremely beneficial on Cobain's road to recovery are clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, as well as a general primary care provider. (Macqueen, Glenda M., and L. Trevor Young, 2001, p. 360.) With the knowledge and access to these types of treatments at an early age, I firmly believe that Cobain's negatively clouded headspace could've had a better chance of being cleared, rather than it continuing to be filled with loud music with lyrics that cried words of hatred towards humanity, throughout his years of fame leading up to his death.