

Mick Chantler, Instructor

The Roosevelts and Bipolar Disorder

Kay Redfield Jameson, one of the leading experts on bipolar disorder and a sufferer herself, has described Theodore Roosevelt as "hypomaniac on a mild day." Mark Twain warned that "we ought to keep in mind that Theodore, as statesman and politician, is insane and irresponsible." The quixotic campaign of 1912 caused Henry Adams to comment: "His mind has gone to pieces... his neurosis may end in a nervous collapse, or acute mania."

Exuberant and childlike were two adjectives often used to describe our 26th president. The man bounced around like a rubber ball. Known at Harvard as a "locomotive in human pants," one of his classmates noted of Roosevelt: "When it was not considered good form to move at more than a walk, Roosevelt was always running." British diplomat Cecil Spring-Rice observed: "You must always remember that the president is about six."

But Roosevelt was also tremendously productive. He wrote 40 books, read at least one book a day, wrote 150,000 or so letters, and lived a "strenuous life" with regular exercise. He acted impulsively and unpredictably — burning an official portrait of himself he didn't like, going skinny dipping in the Potomac with the French ambassador, taking a plunge in a submarine and later hopping on an airplane, and participating in a seance with Harry Houdini. His tour of duty in Cuba early in his career was fraught with danger. His trip to South America was ill advised.

Roosevelt's accomplishments were many. He would become the only man ever with a Nobel Peace Prize and a Congressional Medal of Honor. He set aside millions of acres of forestland and national parks. He was responsible for the Panama Canal. He busted trusts. He steered the ship of state away from laissez-faire and toward progressivism. His legislative victories were impressive.

But years earlier, Roosevelt frittered away most of the considerable funds he inherited on a ranching venture out west. He had to write to make a living until he married Edith Carow, daughter of a wealthy shipping baron. Frittering one's money is one of the things people with bipolar disorder do best.

Roosevelt at age 26 fell into the depths of despair, triggered by the deaths of his first wife and mother. Black care would follow him on an extended trip to the west. He recovered from it, remarried, and resumed his political career. Although we know of no other major depressive episodes in his life, Roosevelt had suicidal ideations as he lay immobile in the Brazilian jungle in 1914.

Depression would be ruinous to other members of Roosevelt's family however.

We know that bipolar disorder is highly heritable. Genetic factors account for as much as 80 percent of its causes. Theodore's mother Martha had exhibited signs of bipolar disorder. Due to a history of alcoholism in his family, Theodore wisely avoided alcohol in favor of coffee or sarsaparilla. His brother Elliot was not so inclined.

Elliot would have all the classic features of full blown bipolar I disorder. Elliot's drug use (laudanum and morphine) and alcoholism was epic, as was his son Hall's. Hall would be unable to hold down a job or a marriage. Elliot never was able to attend college. His spending habits sent his finances into Theodore's conservatorship. He fathered another son with a servant. Theodore's wife Edith described him in this manner: "He drank like a fish and ran after the ladies. I mean ladies not in his own rank, which was much worse." Theodore and Edith could barely hide their shame. One moment Elliot was secluded in a family estate in Virginia, another locked away in a sanitarium in Vienna, then after a wild trip to Paris, he was confined in an asylum there. At age 34 he committed suicide by jumping out of a window. Daughter Eleanor, the future first lady, was not taken to his funeral. There is scant literature connecting Elliot with bipolar disorder.

Theodore and Edith's son Kermit was similarly tragic. Intellectually gifted like his father — he was a voracious reader, completed his Harvard degree in 2 ½ years, learned several languages, wrote a number of books, travelled the world extensively, and became a highly decorated military officer. It is a shame there is no biography of his truly fascinating life, although Kitty Kelly wrote one about his brother Ted. Kermit's level of productivity was that of a bipolar genius. But like his Uncle Elliot, he was terrible with money, drank excessively, strayed from his marriage, had long bouts of depression, and committed suicide. Bipolarism clearly raged through the Roosevelt family.

Eccentric Washington socialite Alice Roosevelt would exhibit signs of bipolar, although she lived to age 96. She married House Speaker Nicholas Longworth, after whom a House office building is named. As a rambunctious teenager, Alice gave father Theodore and step-mother Edith a difficult time. Her father said he could be president or control Alice, but not both. He insisted that no daughter of his would ever smoke cigarettes under his roof. So she did it *on* the roof. She wore short skirts and drove at high speeds down Washington streets. She carried a snake in her purse. She was finally banned from the White House for burying a voodoo doll of Secretary of War Taft's wife in the yard. The bipolar legacy apparently continued through the generations. Kermit's son Dirck committed suicide at the age of 28. Alice's only child, Paulina, whom she conceived in an affair with Senator William Borah, was severely depressed, drug addicted, institutionalized, and given shock therapy. She would finally commit suicide after many attempts at age 31.

Much has been made of the "Kennedy Curse." We should hesitate to say bipolar disorder was the curse of the Roosevelts. As with many other people, bipolar disorder is a mixed blessing. For Theodore, it was more blessing. For brother Elliot and other Roosevelts it was more curse.

