

Racing thoughts: What to consider

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Have you ever had times in your life when you had a tremendous amount of energy, like too much energy, with racing thoughts? I initially ask patients this question when evaluating for bipolar disorder. Some patients insist that they have racing thoughts—thoughts occurring at a rate faster than they can be expressed through speech¹—but not episodes of hyperactivity. This response suggests that some patients can have racing thoughts without a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

Among the patients I treat, racing thoughts vary in severity, duration, and treatment. When untreated, a patient's racing thoughts may range from a mild disturbance lasting a few days to a more severe disturbance occurring daily. In this article, I suggest treatments that may help ameliorate racing thoughts, and describe possible causes that include, but are not limited to, mood disorders.

Major depressive disorder

Many patients with major depressive disorder (MDD) have racing thoughts that often go unrecognized, and this symptom is associated with more severe depression.² Those with a DSM-5 diagnosis of MDD with mixed features could experience prolonged racing thoughts during a major depressive episode.¹ Untreated racing thoughts may explain why many patients with MDD do not improve with an antidepressant alone.³ These patients might benefit from augmentation with a mood stabilizer such as lithium⁴ or a second-generation antipsychotic.⁵

Table

Causes of racing thoughts

| Medications and illicit drugs |
|-------------------------------|
| Amphetamines |
| Methylphenidate |
| Dexamethasone |
| Cocaine |
| Phencyclidine |
| Medical disorders |
| Stroke |
| Traumatic brain injury |
| Multiple sclerosis |
| Cushing's disease |

Source: Reference 1

Other potential causes

Racing thoughts are a symptom, not a diagnosis. Apprehension and anxiety could cause racing thoughts that do not require treatment with a mood stabilizer or antipsychotic. Patients who often worry about having panic attacks or experience severe chronic stress may have racing thoughts. Also, some patients may be taking medications or illicit drugs or have a medical disorder that could cause symptoms of mania or hypomania that include racing thoughts (*Table*¹).



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In summary, when caring for a patient who reports having racing thoughts, consider:

- whether that patient actually does have racing thoughts
- the potential causes, severity, duration, and treatment of the racing thoughts
- the possibility that for a patient with MDD, augmenting an antidepressant with a mood stabilizer or antipsychotic could decrease racing thoughts, thereby helping to alleviate many cases of MDD.

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