

Bipolar Disorder

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, is an illness involving one or more episodes of serious mania and depression. Sometimes a person might only experience symptoms of mania. If a person only experiences feelings of sadness, this is considered depression. During episodes of bipolar disorder, a person's mood can swing from excessively "high" and/or irritable to sad and hopeless, with periods of a normal mood in between. More than 6 million American adults suffer from bipolar disorder in a given year.

Bipolar disorder typically begins in adolescence or early adulthood and continues throughout life. It is often not recognized as an illness and people who have it may suffer needlessly for years.

Bipolar disorder can be extremely distressing and disruptive for those who have this disease, their spouses, family members, friends and employers. Although there is no known cure, bipolar disorder is treatable, and recovery is possible. The combination of medications and psychotherapy helps the vast majority of people return to productive, fulfilling lives.

What causes bipolar disorder?

Although a specific genetic link to bipolar disorder has not been pin pointed, research shows that bipolar disorder tends to run in families. People may inherit a tendency to develop the illness, which can then be triggered by environmental factors such as distressing life events. Brain development, structure and chemicals called neurotransmitters are also thought to play a role in the development of bipolar disorder.

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is often difficult to recognize and diagnose. It causes a person to have a high level of energy, unrealistically expansive thoughts or ideas, and impulsive or reckless behavior. These symptoms may feel good to a person, which may lead to denial that there is a problem.

Another reason bipolar disorder is difficult to diagnose is that its symptoms may appear to be part of another illness or attributed to other problems such as substance abuse, poor school performance, or trouble in the workplace.

Symptoms of mania

The symptoms of mania, which can last up to three months if untreated, include:

- Excessive energy, activity, restlessness, racing thoughts and rapid talking
- Denial that anything is wrong
- Extreme "high" or euphoric feelings -- a person may feel "on top of the world" and nothing, including bad news or tragic events, can change this "happiness."
- Easily irritated or distracted.
- Decreased need for sleep – may last for days with little or no sleep without feeling tired.
- Unrealistic beliefs in one's ability and powers -- feelings of exaggerated confidence or optimism.
- Uncharacteristically poor judgment
- Sustained period of behavior that is different from usual
- Unusual sexual drive

- Abuse of drugs, particularly cocaine, alcohol or sleeping medications
- Provocative, intrusive, or aggressive behavior

Symptoms of Depression

Some people experience periods of normal mood and behavior following a manic phase, however, the depressive phase will eventually appear. Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Sleeping too much or too little, middle-of-the-night or early morning waking
- Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased appetite and weight gain
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities, including sex
- Irritability or restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions.
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment
- Thoughts of death or suicide, including suicide attempts
- Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless

Treatment

Treatment is critical for recovery. A combination of medication, professional help and support from family, friends and peers help individuals with bipolar disorder stabilize their emotions and behavior.

Most people with bipolar disorder can be treated with medication. It is suggested that those with bipolar disorder receive guidance, education and support from a mental health professional to help deal with personal relationships, maintain a healthy self-image and ensure compliance with his or her treatment.

Support and self-help groups are also an invaluable resource for learning coping skills, feeling acceptance and avoiding social isolation. Friends and family should join a support group to better understand the illness so that they can continue to offer encouragement and support to their loved ones.

Resources

Ryan Licht Sang Bipolar Foundation - www.ryanlichtsangbipolarfoundation.org

Juvenile Bipolar Research Foundation - www.jbrf.org

National Foundation for Depressive Illness - www.depression.org

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) - www.dbsalliance.org

Sources

Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2005 Jun;62(6):617-27.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/bipolar-disorder/index.shtml>

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