

UNDERSTANDING BIPOLAR DISORDER

What You Need to Know About This Medical Illness

Introduction

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression or manic-depressive illness, is a medical illness that affects more than three million Americans. Bipolar disorder is highly treatable, and new options are continually improving the outlook for consumers and their loved ones. With accurate diagnosis, effective medication, and proper support, many people with bipolar disorder can lead normal, productive, and fulfilling lives.

When left untreated, however, bipolar illness can have destructive and costly effects, not just for the ill people, but also on the lives of their family members and society. Because of the wide range of potentially damaging symptoms and behaviors that accompany the disorder and because of misunderstanding by the public, people with bipolar illness are often unnecessarily stigmatized by society.

Recognizing Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, or manic depression, is a disorder of the brain resulting in episodes of mania and depression. These episodes last days to months. Between episodes, most people with bipolar illness have periods of relatively normal moods and activity, and they may go years or decades without a major episode – indeed, with little or no sign of illness. For others, managing their illness poses a greater challenge, sometimes because their symptoms may respond only partially to treatment or may recur even with ongoing treatment.

Bipolar disorder is common. It affects approximately one percent of the adult population. In contrast to depression alone, which is more common in women, bipolar illness is seen equally as often in men and women. This brain disorder often begins in adolescence or early adulthood and continues throughout life. A major life event may trigger the first episode. In its early stages, bipolar disorder may masquerade as a different problem, such as alcohol or drug abuse or poor functioning at work or school.

Bipolar disorder is a chronic condition with recurring episodes, much like diabetes, and it generally requires ongoing treatment. If it is left untreated, it tends to get worse, and the symptoms become more pronounced.

Recognition of the disorder at its various stages is important so that the ill person seeks and receives appropriate treatment and can avoid the harmful consequences of the disorder.

Mania is the word that describes the activated phase of bipolar disorder. When it is less severe, it is called hypomania. Symptoms of mania may include:

- either an elated, happy mood or an irritable angry, unpleasant mood
- increased activity and energy, more thoughts and faster thinking than normal
- increased talking, more rapid speech than normal
- ambitious, often grandiose, plans
- poor judgment
- increased sexual interest and activity
- decreased sleep and decreased need for sleep

Depression is the other phase of the illness. Its symptoms may include:

- depressed or apathetic mood
- decreased activity and energy (sometimes, however, restlessness and irritability may be prominent, rather than inactivity)

- fewer thoughts than normal and slowed thinking
- less talking and slowed speech
- less interest in, less participation in, and less enjoyment of activities that are normally enjoyable
- decreased sexual interest and activity
- hopeless or helpless feelings
- feeling of guilt, worthlessness
- pessimistic outlook
- suicidal thoughts
- changed appetite, either significantly increased or decreased
- changed sleep, either increased (with an increased need for sleep) or decreased (with tiredness and an inability to fall asleep or stay asleep)

The patterns of untreated episodes vary markedly both among individuals and at different times in a given individual's life. Some people with untreated bipolar disorder have only an occasional episode of mania and repeated episodes of depression. Others may experience mania or hypomania as their main symptoms and have few episodes of depression. Often a period of depression will follow a manic episode, and sometimes people go directly from depression into mania.

It is extremely important to recognize mania and depression early in the course of bipolar illness because early diagnosis and treatment can help prevent the harmful consequences of untreated episodes such as school failure, loss of employment, damage to important relationships, divorce, and suicide.

The experience of depression

When they are depressed, people with bipolar disorder are often in a profoundly sad, irritable or "flat" mood. The inner pain may be intense and result in feelings that life is totally without pleasure and not worth living.

The most frightening part of bipolar disorder to people who are depressed is often their inability to concentrate, remember, and make decisions. In the midst of a severe depression, people may not be able to follow a newspaper story or a television comedy. Major decision-making is impossible. Even minor decisions such as what to have for dinner can seem overwhelming. Self-esteem is very low in a depressed person, who often dwells on memories of losses or failures and feels guilty and helpless. "I am not worth much" and "the world is a terrible place" are common negative thoughts.

Symptoms of depression often come together in a strong feeling of hopelessness, a belief that nothing will ever improve, and exaggerated pessimism. Periods of depression can lead to the wish to die or thoughts of suicide.

While no one knows the exact cause of bipolar disorder, researchers believe it is the result of a chemical imbalance that affects certain parts of the brain. Researchers exploring the origin of the disorder have uncovered a genetic link to the illness. Because bipolar disorder tends to run in families, close relatives of someone with the disorder are more likely to be affected by the disease. Heredity, however, is not always apparent in people with bipolar disorder, and certainly not everybody with genetic predisposition becomes ill.

(Excerpted from NAMI, The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness. For a complete version of this article, please visit www.nami.org)

