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Bipolar Disorder: What You Need to Know To Help Yourself and Your Loved Ones

If you have bipolar disorder, you may feel helpless and hopeless. The illness, also known as manic-depressive disorder, can cause extreme behavior, so you can't function at work, with your family or in social situations. Some people with bipolar disorder also become suicidal. Help is available; and the best way to start is to learn more.

What Is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder involves high-energy manic episodes and the extreme lows of depression. These mood episodes last at least a few days, and the person acts significantly different from his or her normal self.

More than three million Americans – about one percent of the population – have bipolar disorder.¹

The disorder occurs equally among males and females. It often begins between ages 15 and 24.²

What Causes Bipolar Disorder?

The cause of bipolar disorder is not completely understood. We know that it runs in families. It may also be affected by the living environment or family situation. One possible cause is an imbalance of brain chemicals.

A child has a greater risk of having bipolar disorder if a close family member such as a parent, grandparent, brother, or sister has it. There is nothing that a parent can do to cause or prevent it.

How Is Bipolar Disorder Diagnosed?

Bipolar disorder is hard to diagnose. There are no lab tests, although urine and blood may be tested to rule out other problems. The physician will ask questions about the symptoms – both manic and depressive – and how long those symptoms last.

How Is Bipolar Disorder Treated?

The sooner bipolar disorder is identified, the better the chances of getting it under control. Some people struggle with extreme impairment and suicide, so managing the illness – including inpatient stabilization, if needed – is important. Any medical

Recognizing the Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

- Mood episodes can be mild or extreme. They may come on slowly or suddenly, and may last for several months.
- During a manic episode, people may feel very happy, energetic or on edge. Some people spend a lot of money or get involved in dangerous activities.
- After a manic episode, people may return to normal or swing in the opposite direction to feelings of sadness, depression and hopelessness.
- When depressed, people may have trouble thinking and have memory problems. They may also think about suicide.
- In children, symptoms may change more rapidly and be less obvious. Children are less likely to show abnormally high energy during manic episodes, and are more likely to be persistently irritable.

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problems should also be diagnosed and treated; and alcohol and drugs should be avoided.

Many medicines are used to treat bipolar disorder. People with the condition may need to try several before they find the combination that works for them, then they must take their medicines regularly, even if they're feeling better. Most people need to take a mood stabilizer every day. In addition, antipsychotics and antidepressants may be prescribed.

It's especially important to

recognize the early warning signs of a manic episode, so they can start treatment early with medicine for manic phases.

Counseling for the person and the family is also an important treatment. It can help them cope with the work and relationship issues that the illness may cause. Charting the person's mood can help him or her learn what triggers the mood swings, so he or she may be able to avoid them. Talking with others who suffer from bipolar disorder may also help.

Bipolar Disorder in Children

In the past, experts thought bipolar disorder was the same in children and adults. But symptoms in children and teens are different from those in adults, and need different treatment.

Bipolar disorder can be hard to diagnose in children and teens. The symptoms can look like symptoms of other problems, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), alcohol and drug abuse problems, or conduct disorder.

Early diagnosis is important because children with bipolar disorder are likely to have other problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, trouble in school, running away from home, fighting, and even suicide.

Coping with bipolar disorder isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. UBH is here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges (see Resources).

How You Can Help a Loved One with Bipolar Disorder

Family members often feel helpless when a loved one is depressed or manic. If your loved one has bipolar disorder, here's how you can help:

- Encourage your loved one to go to counseling and join a support group.
- Get counseling for yourself too.
- Encourage your loved one to take prescribed medicines regularly.
- Learn to recognize early signs of a manic or depressive episode and help your loved one cope and get treatment. Learn the difference between a

manic episode and when your loved one is just having a good day.

- Learn the warning signs for suicide, which include:
 - Drinking alcohol heavily or taking illegal drugs
 - Talking, writing or drawing about death, including writing suicide notes
 - Talking about things that can cause harm, such as pills, guns or knives
 - Spending long periods of time alone
 - Giving away possessions
 - Acting aggressively or suddenly appearing calm

Extra Help for Children and Teens

There are additional steps you can take to reduce your child or teen's symptoms. It helps to keep your child's room quiet, and have your child go to bed the same time every night. Also try to control the amount of stress in your child's life. Help your child:

- Get enough exercise and eat a balanced diet.
- Avoid alcohol, drugs and caffeine.
- Ask for help from friends and family.

Resources

United Behavioral Health

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.

www.liveandworkwell.com

- Visit the "Bipolar Disorder" Mental Health Condition Center for more information and resources about this condition.

The information, advice, treatments and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for educational purposes only and are not meant to be used in place of professional clinical consultations for individual health needs. Certain treatments may not be covered under your benefit plan. Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services. UBH does not recommend or endorse any treatment, medication, or suggested approach, specific or otherwise. Consult with your clinician, physician or mental health care provider for specific health care needs, treatment or medications.

1 Brent DA, Pan RJ (2008). Bipolar disorders. In MH Ebert et al., eds., *Current Diagnosis and Treatment in Psychiatry, 2nd ed.*, pp. 607-611. New York: McGraw-Hill.
2 Müller-Oerlinghausen B, et al. (2002). Bipolar disorder. *Lancet*, 359(9302): 241-247.