

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar Disorder, previously referred to as a manic-depression, is a chemical imbalance in the brain that causes shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to function. Bipolar illness is different than the typical ups and downs many people experience. The symptoms are severe and can impair work and school performance, relationships and cause serious consequences.

Bipolar illness is seen in about one percent of adults age eighteen and older. The symptoms usually surface in early adulthood, but some patients have their initial symptoms during childhood. Sometimes, the symptoms are missed early in the course of the disease.

Symptoms may include dramatic mood swings from high moods and irritability to very low moods which include sadness and hopelessness. The periods of highs and lows are referred to as "episodes" of mania or depression. Symptoms of mania may include increased energy, restlessness or agitation, racing thoughts, little need for sleep, poor judgment, poor impulse control including spending sprees, decreased need for sleep, increased sex drive, use of drugs and provocative, aggressive behaviors. A depressive episode may include feelings of hopelessness and emptiness, sadness and guilt, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly, changes in appetite and sleep habits, pre-occupation with various physical problems and even thoughts of suicide. When symptoms are severe, the individual may experience hallucinations, paranoia or other psychotic symptoms.

Bipolar disorder is thought to result from a variety of causes. Although genetics seem to play a part in determining an individual's vulnerability to the illness, most scientists agree that there is no single cause for the disorder.

With effective treatment, bipolar disorder can be treated and individuals can lead full and productive lives. Most behavioral health professionals agree that a combination approach which includes psychotherapy and medication is optimal for treating the disorder. Medications may include mood stabilizers, anticonvulsant medications with mood-stabilizing properties, antipsychotics, benzodiazepines and antidepressants. In general, treatment is most beneficial if it is ongoing rather than sporadic as compliance is essential for good control. Charting mood symptoms, sleep patterns and stressful events may help patients and their families better understand this disorder.