

BIPOLAR AFFECTIVE DISORDER
Information for Patients and Families
Covenant Health
Mental Health Program
Grey Nuns Community Hospital & Misericordia Community Hospital

What is Bipolar Affective Disorder?

Bipolar Affective Disorder (also commonly referred to as Manic Depressive Illness) is an abnormal fluctuation in moods, varying between marked highs (mania) and lows (depression) with periods of stability in mood. "Bipolar" refers to two ends in the range of our emotion and "Affective" means our moods or emotions. This illness has been known for centuries.

This disorder causes dramatic changes in mood resulting in interruptions in a person's usual behaviour and ability to function. The frequency, severity and length of an episode of illness can vary from one person to another. During an episode of mania, a person may not recognize his/her increased energy and drive.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder?

The main symptom of mania is an elevated mood. This goes beyond feelings of happiness and pleasure that we all feel. Individuals with this disorder may lose self control. Typical symptoms of mania include:

- Persistently euphoric (very happy) or feeling "high"
- Irritability or excitability
- Increased activity level
- Appetite abnormalities
- Increased sexual activity
- Racing thoughts
- Pressured speech
- Impulsive behaviour
- Non-completion of tasks
- Poor judgment
- Increased spending
- Decreased need for sleep

Typical symptoms of depression may include:

- Feelings of sadness, guilt, irritability or feeling numb
- Appetite changes- usually decreased
- Weight loss
- Sleep disturbance
- Lowered energy
- Excessive fatigue
- Slow speech and/or movement
- Decreased ability to think or concentrate
- Difficulty making decisions
- Isolation from others
- Repeated thoughts of death or self harm

There are distinct patterns in this illness resulting in different types of Bipolar Disorder. Your doctor can make a diagnosis. This illness can co-exist with other problems such as anxiety or substance abuse. Talk openly with your doctor about your experiences so that he/she can provide you with the proper treatment.

What causes Bipolar Disorder?

A specific cause has not been identified, but there are a number of factors that can contribute to the onset of the illness. They include brain chemistry, genetics and the environment in which we live and work. More and more is being discovered about the role of brain chemistry in our moods. Bipolar Disorder is believed to be a result of an imbalance of brain chemicals and the electrical charges naturally found in the brain.

How is Bipolar Disorder treated?

Effective treatment is often a combination of several approaches that include:

- Medication therapy such as mood stabilizers
- Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT)
- Patient and Family education groups
- Supportive Counseling
- Inpatient hospitalization when needed
- Self help groups
- Psychotherapy

What can be helpful?

People with this diagnosis can lead healthy, productive and rewarding lives. Like any other illness there are things you can do to manage your illness.

- Talk to your doctor openly about the symptoms you are experiencing
- Build a trusting relationship with your doctor
- Take medication as prescribed and report any side effects
- Do not stop or change medication until you do so with the direction of your doctor
- Abstain from substance abuse
- Learn as much as you can about this illness
- Monitor your sleep, get regular exercise and maintain a healthy diet
- Build a strong support network

If Someone you care about has Bipolar Disorder

Many people find it helpful to attend an education and /or support group. Additionally, you may want to check out what other resources are available in your community.

Most people who have a mental illness appreciate the support of others. Listen, offer support, and if possible maintain a close relationship. Help the individual make healthy choices. You may also help by recognizing early signs and symptoms of the illness and alerting the person in a non judgmental way. Offer encouragement. Remember treatment can be effective so maintain hope.

Where can you get more information?

- ask your doctor or nurse or therapist
- call Health Link - 780 408-5465
- call Edmonton Mental Health Clinics - 780 342 - 7700
- try Canadian Mental Health Association website www.cmha.ca
- dial 211 for The Support Network

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