Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, formerly termed Manic-Depression, is a condition involving mood swings, which are frequently accompanied by other specific symptoms and behaviors. The mood swings, also termed episodes, can present in three forms: manic episodes, depressive episodes and mixed episodes. Manic episodes include overly "high" or irritable mood, depressive episodes include sadness and hopelessness and a mixed episode is a rapid vacillation between mania and depression. Typically, there are periods of normal mood between episodes.

Bipolar affects approximately 1% of adults in the Canadian population; approximately 333,114 people in Canada will experience bipolar disorder (2002 Public Health Agency report on Mental Illness in Canada). Men and women are equally likely to develop Bipolar disorder. Approximately half of the people affected with Bipolar began experiencing symptoms before the age of 25; therefore, it is important for college students to be aware of Bipolar Disorder.

What are the signs of Bipolar Disorder?

There are two different types of Bipolar disorder. Bipolar I includes manic or mixed episodes followed by depression or a return to normal mood. Bipolar II consists of episodes of significant depression, followed or preceded by a milder version of mania, termed hypomanic episodes. Hypomanic episodes have the same symptoms as mania, except there are no delusions or hallucinations. An additional distinction is that hypomanic symptoms are not severe enough to interfere with social or occupational functioning or to require hospitalization. There are many variations in how quickly people cycle between the different episodes, the frequency and the intensity of episodes.

Below are lists of the most familiar symptoms of mania and depression.

Mania

- Greatly increased energy and/or restlessness
- Extreme irritability
- Racing thoughts
- Rapid speech that is hard to interrupt
- Poor concentration, memory and indecisiveness
- Decreased need for sleep
- Restlessness and/or anxiety
- Excessive feeling of well being (euphoria)
- Unrealistic or grandiose belief in own abilities
- Reckless, impulsive behavior (i.e. spending sprees, out of character sexual behaviors)
- Poor judgment
- Abuse of substances
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Delusions and/or paranoia
- In severe cases, thoughts of death or suicide.

Depression

- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Persistence of sad mood or feeling "empty"
- Excessive crying
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Loss of energy and increased fatigue
- Poor self care and hygiene
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Poor concentration, memory and indecisiveness
- Restlessness and/or anxiety
- Abuse of substances
- Changes in appetite and weight
- In severe cases, thoughts of death or suicide.

Adapted from Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection [http://ccvillage.buffalo.edu/vpc.html]
What are the causes of Bipolar disorder?

There are many theories regarding the cause of Bipolar disorder. Much of the research suggests there is an imbalance of specific neurotransmitters in the brain. Neurotransmitters are chemicals that facilitate information passing between nerve cells in the brain. Scientists are unclear exactly how these neurotransmitters impact the development of Bipolar disorder. However, medications that allow an increase or decrease in specific neurotransmitters help to reduce bipolar symptoms.

Twin and adoption studies indicate there is a strong genetic component to Bipolar disorder. More than two-thirds of people with Bipolar have at least one close relative diagnosed with either Bipolar disorder or depression.

What is the treatment for Bipolar disorder?

Symptoms of Bipolar disorder can often lead to damaged relationships, difficulty at work or school, and even suicide. People who are left untreated will continue to experience numerous shifts in mood. However, Bipolar disorder can be treated and people can lead full and productive lives.

Although there is no “cure” for Bipolar disorder, medications can significantly reduce and manage symptoms and mood swings. People may continue to have residual symptoms, despite optimal medication treatment; however, their quality of life is frequently better. Psychiatrists tend to use a combination of mood stabilizers and anti-depressant medications to prevent clients from rapidly shifting from one episode to another.

Similar to other conditions, Bipolar disorder can cause serious disruptions in ones interpersonal relationships and life in general. Therefore, a combination of medication and psychotherapy is often most effective in managing symptoms of Bipolar disorder. Increased levels of stress or change often lead to the onset of episodes.

Psychotherapy can help the individual with Bipolar disorder to stabilize daily routines, deal effectively with stress, be vigilant of encroaching symptoms, and to develop effective methods of communicating regarding their symptoms and behaviors.

Given the serious disruptions and stressful family situation arising from episodes, family members may benefit from education regarding the disorder. Family and friends may learn strategies to help cope with the episodes and ways to be active in the treatment (i.e. recognizing the onset of episodes). Treatment for Bipolar disorder is most effective when it is continuous and long-term.

Please note: The information above is not intended as a substitute for contact with a mental health professional. It is provided as a means for visitors to this web page to obtain additional information on topics typically discussed in counseling. Inevitably, some of the information represents opinion. If you read information that raises concerns or questions, we invite you to come in to the Counselling & Career Centre in room 1402.

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