



Depression: Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is an illness that causes severe mood swings, from the highest of highs (mania) to the lowest of lows (depression). One in a hundred people are affected by the illness. It affects woman and men equally. It tends to affect the middle to upper social economic classes more that the lower economic classes. It normally comes to the fore between 20 to 30 years of age, but this may also vary.

Persons with bipolar disorder usually have frequent episodes of the illness which is destructive to their private and professional lives. In order to explain bipolar affective disorder, it is important to differentiate between the ups and downs in mood that everyone has and those of the bipolar sufferer. Everyone has feelings of happiness, sadness, anger etc..., which are normal emotions and are part of everyday life.

Bipolar disorder in contrast is a medical condition in which people have mood swings out of proportion, or totally unrelated to what is going on in their lives. These swings affect thoughts, feelings, physical health, behaviour and functioning. It is imperative to note that bipolar disorder is not anyone's fault, nor do they have an unstable personality - it occurs due to a chemical imbalance in the brain and is more importantly, treatable.

Bipolar disorder and diabetes can be compared, as both require ongoing medical treatment (medication) and monitoring by the sufferer or patient. Just as diabetics must take their medication, monitor their sugar levels and monitor how they feel physically, people suffering from bipolar must take their medication, monitor their medication levels and monitor how they feel emotionally.

Society expects illnesses to be cured and is often not prepared to tolerate those who require constant treatment for illnesses that have no known cure. Unfortunately, to this day, most mental illnesses are treated rather than cured.

Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

a. Some Symptoms of Mania

The principal symptom of the manic phase is an elevated, expansive or irritable mood. The early stages may reveal one to be more active, sociable, talkative, self-confident, perceptive and creative than usual. As the mood becomes higher some or all of the following symptoms may be seen:

- Decreased need for sleep
- Feeling excessively good or euphoric. This is a feeling of "being on top of the world"
- Creative thinking and heightened perceptions
- Extreme irritability
- Restless or agitated feelings
- Excessive energy and excitability
- Jumping from one activity to the other without ever completing anything

- Rapid, unpredictable emotional changes
- Irritability and anger
- Racing thoughts and flights of ideas and speech
- Hyperactivity, excessive plans and increased participation in numerous activities
- Resulting in reckless driving, spending sprees, foolish investments etc
- Inflated self-esteem and Grandiose beliefs
- Self-confidence may reach the point of grandiose delusions in which one thinks one has a special connection with God, celebrities, or political leaders
- Increased sexual activity
- Inappropriate and impulsive behaviour
- Poor judgment and lack of insight
- Loss of touch with reality, and disorientation
- Delusionary thoughts, hallucinations or even hearing of voices
- Paranoia and delusions of being persecuted
- Severe insomnia, profound weight loss and exhaustion.

b. Some Symptoms of Depression

The principle symptom of depression is a sad and despairing mood. Depending on the severity of the depression some or all of the following may be experienced:

- Feeling of intense sadness.
- Decreased appetite and interest in food leading to weight loss. Increased use of alcohol or drug abuse
- Increased or decreased need or ability to sleep.
- Lack of energy, excessive fatigue or tiredness.
- Loss of interest in work, hobbies and people.
- Inability to experience pleasure or feel the love and concern of others and consequently return it.
- Changes in self-image.
- Preoccupation with failure or inadequacy and thus a loss of self-esteem.
- Obsession with negative thoughts.
- Feelings of uselessness, hopelessness and excessive guilt which result in suicidal thoughts or actions.
- Hypochondriacal worries, fears or illnesses, which prove to be psychosomatic.
- Decreased ability to think, concentrate or remember.
- Decreased sexual drive.
- Tearfulness.

Living with Bipolar Disorder

There is no single simple cure or treatment for Bipolar Disorder. However a combination of Education, Medication, Psychology and Support can help bipolars to change from sufferers to survivors and live fulfilling lives.

Medication and Psychiatry

The role of a good psychiatrist is vital. It is important to have faith in and like your psychiatrist. You must feel free to discuss all the aspects of the illness with your psychiatrist. It is difficult for a psychiatrist to help deal with any problem (be it side effects of

medication or symptoms of the illness) if the people they are trying to help, do not talk about their problems.

Try to keep a record of what medications you take. Ask your psychiatrist what the role of each medication is. You have a right to know why you are taking medication and all good psychiatrists will gladly advise you when asked.

Unfortunately we as patients tend not to ask questions and then complain we are not told "Don't be afraid to ask". Have faith that there is a medication or combinations of medications out there that will help you cope. Work as a team with your psychiatrist. You will find it will help. Let your psychiatrist help you by adapting your medication through bad phases.

Psychotherapy

The psychologist's role in helping you cope is vital. The psychological impact of the illness is huge and it affects our very lives and the way we see ourselves. It also effects the way others treat us and we treat them, resulting in a lot of pain.

Tips on Choosing a Psychologist/Therapist:

- When choosing a therapist ask how available they are. They should be readily available, as well as flexible in approach.
- Also check when starting with a new therapist whether they are going away on a holiday in the near future. Such disruptions are unnerving to someone who has been or is in a fragile state.
- You must feel comfortable with your psychologist so that you can be completely honest with her or him without feeling threatened.
- Your psychologist should assist you with learning to identify your own unique stressors and vulnerabilities and ways of dealing with them.
- Your psychologist should assist you with helping you identify and detect early warning signs of mania so that a full blown manic episode can be avoided or aborted (This helps give you a greater feeling of control over the condition).
- Building a relationship with a psychologist who can guide you through the rough patches and teach you coping skills is invaluable.
- Ideally there should be a good working relationship between the psychologist and psychiatrist as they both have their own roles and should complement each other with the prime focus being your well being.

Support

The support you get from you those who love you and care about you play such an important role in giving you the strength to survive. Many "friends" will vanish and therefore the remaining "real friends" become more important. If the these friends read about, learn about and understand more about bipolar affective disorder they will be able to provide more help, love and support.

Dealing with bipolar affective disorder is not easy for the sufferer or the supporters. Knowledge of the illness and acceptance and recognition of the illness by all affected can prevent a lot of unnecessary pain and suffering.

The Role of Support Groups

A support group can play an important role in helping both the bipolar sufferer and their loved ones to come to terms with and live with the illness. At meetings Bipolars and their supporters or loved ones are given the opportunity to get a better perspective of the illness.

Bipolars meet others who have been through what they have been through and worse. They also get the opportunity to help and advise others. Bipolars like all humans are unique individuals and as such different types of people deal with the illness in different ways.

Bipolars can meet people who are similar to them and who are affected in similar ways. Bipolars can openly discuss their fears and hear how others like them have coped with the same fears. Bipolars can truly empathize with each other, as they can understand what it feels like. Those who are not bipolar can only imagine they "know what it feels like".

Supporters meet others who like them have to live with the illness. They can share the issues that they struggle with, with other supporters who have similar problems. Supporters gain more insight into the illness by meeting other bipolars who have the same problems their loved ones have. This enables them to see the illness as an illness and helps to stop them from blaming the individual bipolar they know.

Bipolars and supporters can befriend others who are dealing with the same issues. They can be there for each other, as they understand. Bipolars and supporters have the opportunity to help others like them. As they say "whoever helps is helped most".