



Bipolar Disorder: An Emotional Roller Coaster

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Just as there are trends in society, so too are there trends in mental health. Recently the media has focused increased attention on bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness.

This brain disorder causes dramatic changes in a person's mood, energy, and ability to function. People who are bipolar experience euphoric highs alternating with bouts of depression. Moreover their mood can change quickly for no apparent reason.

Bipolar disorder affects 2 million adults in America, about 1% of the population. In both males and females, symptoms of this disorder usually begin in late adolescence or early adulthood. This age range is not exclusive however. There are some cases that begin in childhood and some that begin later in life.

Symptoms

To be diagnosed as bipolar, an individual must experience dramatic mood swings and changes in energy level. At the high energy level, known as the manic phase, the symptoms include:

- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Racing thoughts
- Talking fast
- Distractibility
- Little sleep
- Unrealistic beliefs in abilities or powers
- Spending sprees

At the low energy level, the depressive phase, symptoms include:

- Sad mood
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Guilt
- A sense of helplessness
- Loss of interest
- Fatigue
- Sleeping too much or sleeping too little
- Change in appetite
- Occasional suicidal thoughts

To be diagnosable, symptoms of mania must persist for at least a week and symptoms of depression must be present for at least two weeks. But the patterns of mood change vary a great deal. Some people may be depressed most of the time and have just a few manic episodes in a year while others may experience depression alternating with multiple episodes of mania within a single week or even a single day. The latter is called "rapid cycling" and occurs more commonly among women than men.

In addition, only about one-third of people with bipolar disorder have symptoms of extreme mood all the time. They're always one or the other, either manic or depressed, and are never non-symptomatic. About two-thirds however have periods of time between episodes where they're free of symptoms.

Also there's a subgroup of people who have "mixed bipolar states." When in this state, they experience symptoms of both mania and depression at the same time. For example, an individual in a mixed state may have racing thoughts while at the same time he feels physically fatigued, helpless, and overwhelmed with sadness.

It's also common among people with bipolar disorder to use drugs or alcohol in excess. And most of them give what seems to be a valid reason. They're attempting to control the symptoms they're experiencing in the present. But in the long run the effects of drugs and alcohol on brain chemistry make the symptoms worse.

In more extreme cases of bipolar illness, individuals suffer from psychotic states. They may have hallucinations (seeing, hearing, or sensing things that are not there) or delusions (thinking or believing something that is not true). For example, in a manic state, someone might "hear" voices telling her she has important information that's needed by the government and she may have the delusion that government officials are watching her every move. Or in a depressed state, someone might see images of blood on his hands and believe that he has committed a terrible crime.

Diagnosing Children and Adolescents

Children and young adolescents with bipolar disorder tend to experience rapid cycling between moods. Often they experience many mood swings in a single day. Also mixed bipolar states are more common than in adults. In older adolescents, the symptoms of bipolar disorder begin to resemble the symptoms common in adults.

Yet diagnosing bipolar disorder among children and young adolescents has its difficulties. For example, the symptoms of mania sometimes look like the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder. Confounding the problem even more, symptoms of mania or depression are likely to appear in children and young adolescents who are involved with drugs or alcohol.

Getting Help

For those with bipolar disorder, it's important to get into treatment. There are two good reasons. First, if left untreated, the illness gets worse over time. Second, effective treatment can help people avoid problems, such as the life-threatening, suicidal thoughts in a depressive state or getting into financial or legal trouble for actions taken while in a manic state.

Treatment includes medication and therapy. Both are critical.

Treating bipolar illness with medication has been proven highly effective. Many medications now available can help to stabilize moods. Long-term treatment with medication has been shown to be most effective.

Therapy is the other key to effective treatment. Therapy helps individuals come to terms with their disorder and also with taking the medication. In counseling sessions, individuals can discuss any problems they're having with their moods and work on solving those problems. If

fortunate enough to have psychiatric rehabilitation services as a covered benefit of their health insurance, individuals can use these services to reestablish any skills that have been impaired by the disorder.

Bipolar disorder is a potentially disabling illness. As with most mental health disorders, prompt, accurate diagnosis and treatment can result in a positive outcome.

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