

BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder (previously known as manic depression) is a mental illness that is characterised by recurring episodes of depression (lows) and mania (extreme highs). It may begin with either an episode of depression, or an episode of mania, although it is more common for a depressive episode to occur first. The first onset of bipolar disorder illness is typically in late adolescence or early adulthood.

Causes

Whilst the exact cause of bipolar disorder is unknown, it is believed that it is related to the interaction of a number of factors including biological, environmental and individual psychological factors. However, people with a family history of bipolar disorder are at a moderately increased risk of developing the condition themselves, although other (as yet unknown) factors which may predispose or protect against this illness also play a part. Bipolar disorder has two sets of symptoms:

Symptoms of depression

In the mind: Feeling bad, worthless or guilty, or generally being self-critical and self-blaming. Negative and pessimistic thoughts. Preoccupation with dark and gloomy themes and thoughts of death or suicide. Persistent feelings of unhappiness, or uncharacteristic moodiness and irritability. Losing interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed. Difficulty concentrating or in making decisions.

In the body: Losing appetite and weight (although some people may turn to comfort foods and therefore put on weight). Difficulty sleeping, or sometimes staying in bed well into the day. Tiredness, lack of energy and loss of motivation, or alternatively feeling anxious or uptight.

Symptoms of mania

The early symptoms of mania are quite subtle and a person may just appear to be on a bit of a high. Gradually however, the typical symptoms of mania develop. As a manic episode progresses, the person may start to act in a more driven and/or disorganised manner.

In the body: High levels of energy, reduced need for sleep, markedly increased sex drive, excessive spending of money.

In the mind: Grandiose plans and ideas, such as a preoccupation with ideas of power or importance. Poor judgment. As the illness progresses, the person may well exhibit confused thinking (thought disorder) and/or have firmly held false beliefs (delusional ideas).

Seeking help

Effective treatments are readily available for bipolar illnesses. The earlier treatment is started, the quicker and better the recovery. With appropriate treatment the majority of people who experience bipolar disorder will recover. A person experiencing bipolar disorder will require specialist assistance.

Medication

Medical treatment for bipolar disorder involves the use of a *mood stabilising medication* such as Lithium Carbonate, or Sodium Valproate. During a depressive episode antidepressants may also be required and during a manic episode antipsychotic medication may also be needed.

Psychotherapy

In addition the person may need individual psychotherapy, family support and counselling, practical support, and involvement in a recovery program which focuses on helping people get back on track. The focus of treatment is to control symptoms, to assist the person to make sense of and overcome the trauma of their illness, and to prevent relapse, by decreasing risk factors, and promoting protective factors.

Useful contacts:

Shine: Helpline 1890 621 631 ; Website www.shineonline.ie

College of Psychiatry of Ireland: www.irishpsychiatry.ie

Aware: Helpline: 1890 30 33 02; Website: www.aware.ie