

Tip Sheet: Understanding Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a chronic mental illness that causes dramatic shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to think clearly. People with bipolar have high and low moods, known as mania and depression, which differ from the typical ups and downs most people experience. If left untreated, the symptoms usually get worse. Although bipolar is a lifelong condition, you can better manage your symptoms and mood swings by following a treatment plan, which may include medications and psychological counseling.

With mania, people may feel extremely irritable or euphoric. People living with bipolar may experience several extremes in the form of agitation, sleeplessness, talkativeness, sadness or hopelessness. They may also experience extreme pleasure-seeking or risk-taking behaviors.

People's symptoms and the severity of their mania or depression vary widely. Although bipolar disorder can occur at any point in life, the average age of onset is when you are a teenager or young twenties. Every year, 2.8% of the U.S. population is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, with nearly 83% of cases being classified as severe. Bipolar disorder affects men and women equally.

Symptoms

A person with bipolar disorder may have distinct manic or depressive states. A person with mixed episodes experiences both extremes simultaneously or in rapid sequence. Severe bipolar episodes of mania or depression may also include psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions.

To be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a person must have experienced mania or hypomania. Hypomania is a milder form of mania that does not include psychotic episodes. People with hypomania can often function normally in social situations or at work. During periods of mania, people frequently behave impulsively, make reckless decisions and take unusual risks. Most of the time, people in manic states are unaware of the negative consequences of their actions.

Depression produces a combination of physical and emotional symptoms that inhibit a person's ability to function nearly every day for a period of at least two weeks. The level of depression can range from severe to moderate to a mild low mood. The lows of bipolar depression can be debilitating and difficult to treat, but it is possible to get your symptoms under control and improve your mental health by getting treatment from a mental health professional.