

STRAIGHT TALK ON MENTAL ILLNESS

Bipolar Disorder; New name, old illness by **Maria Burns, SLC Staff Writer**



What is bipolar disorder? Older adults may think this is a new disorder. It isn't. Bipolar is the current name for what used to be referred to as 'manic-depression'. People with bipolar disorder have dramatic mood swings. In their periods of mania, they can be thrilling to be around. They have increased energy, believe they can accomplish almost anything, are excited about ideas, jumping from one thought to another. They often have increased sex drive and little need for sleep. Manic periods can also include alcohol and drug use, particularly cocaine, to get even more manic, or sleeping medications to calm down. During manic periods, a person may spend all of his money *convinced* that it doesn't matter because he is going to make a million dollars on his book he is going to write about his life. People with bipolar are often very intelligent and can speak so confidently to friends and family about the business they are starting or the book they are writing that everyone believe them – for a while.

The other side of bipolar disorder is depression. During depressive periods a person feels sad, worthless and hopeless. It is pretty much the opposite of the period of mania. Now he has less energy, doesn't believe he can do anything right. He may even attempt suicide. Bipolar disorder is a serious life-affecting condition. However, it is not a life-ending condition. Bipolar disorder can be treated and managed so that those who suffer from it can lead normal, everyday lives.

It is important to note that bipolar cannot be cured, which means for almost all sufferers it is necessary to continue treatment the rest of their lives. That said, treatment isn't really that difficult. There are numerous medications out there that help those with bipolar lead healthy and happy lives.

Get treatment early

One of the biggest things that can be done to aid in treatment is to begin treatment as soon as possible. The earlier bipolar disorder is treated, the better. Bipolar generally begins in the later teens through the early 20's. It can affect people of all ages, but this is the age group most likely to start experiencing the signs of bipolar. Also, research appears to show a connection between bipolar disorder and genetics. People who have family members that are bipolar should be aware that this puts them at higher risk for bipolar disorder. The earlier treatment is started the better results are shown to be. People that start treatment early have been shown more likely to stick with the treatment. Successful treatment will allow a person to live a completely productive life – without having to worry about bipolar episodes.

Medication

Unlike some other mood disorders, bipolar disorder must be treated with medication. There are more than a dozen medications on the market to treat all aspects of bipolar. It is important that patients work with their doctors to find the medication or medications that are the best fit.

It is estimated that up to 50 percent of bipolar individuals do not take their medications as directed which results in experiencing bipolar episodes. This can be easily prevented by

taking medications as required. Setting up certain routines could help in reminding patients to take their medication consistently.

Medications will vary based on the patient's needs. What works for one patient doesn't always work for another. That's why there are a number of medications on the market. A doctor should work with a patient to figure out the best medication for that individual. It is important for people suffering from bipolar medication to take only their medication – never anyone else's – and to let their doctor know if they are experiencing any kind of side effects or if they feel the medicine isn't working.

Mood stabilizers are the most common medication given to those suffering from bipolar disorder. This stops suffering from having manic or depressive episodes. Some medications can help in preventing just manic episodes. Other prevent just depressive episodes. Some work in preventing both. It will depend on how severe a patient's past episodes have been as well as a number of other factors that should be discussed with a doctor.

Many medications- not just those for bipolar disorder- can have unpleasant side effects. Patients must not stop taking their medications without talking to a doctor no matter what the side effects. Often, if a doctor can find a different medicine that will have fewer side effects if a patient asks.

Because of the seriousness of bipolar disorder it is also important to make sure not to take any other medications or pills without talking to a doctor. This includes even vitamins and aspirin. The medications used to treat bipolar disorder could be affected by any other medication and could affect treatment.

Therapy

Therapy can help treat bipolar disorder along with medication. This is when patients talk to a therapist or psychiatrist about what they are thinking or feeling. People with bipolar disorder might feel a little out of control of their emotions – even while during treatment. A therapist can help provide support to someone undergoing treatment for bipolar disorder by listening to their feelings as they describe what they're going through. A therapist can also help a person managing bipolar disorder learn to manage mood changes. After suffering from bipolar disorder, a person may have trouble when the medication begins to stabilize their moods, a therapist can provide support for these changes and other changes a person goes through during treatment. Therapists can monitor a patient's treatment to make sure the patient is sticking to their medication and treatment.

People who have suffered for bipolar disorder will often be forced to confront their actions from when they were suffering an episode. These are often unpleasant things that happened in either a manic or depressive state. While the behavior was the result of bipolar disorder, it can still be very hard for the patient to deal with now that he or she is in treatment and the episodes have stopped. People suffering a bipolar episode do a number of irrational things that can hurt people – emotional or even physically- and can be embarrassing or hard to deal with once the patient comes out of the episode. It is important to have someone to talk to about these feelings. A therapist can be very valuable when it comes to dealing with these feelings.

Finding a doctor and/or therapist

Finding a doctor and/or therapist that the patient is comfortable with is very important. A psychiatrist will be able to provide a bipolar individual with both the prescription medication and therapy. Sometimes, a separate medical doctor or psychiatrist will provide the medication while another therapist sees the patient on a regular basis. Either way it is important that the patient get along with any medical providers helping him or her deal with bipolar disorder.

Because bipolar is a lifelong condition, the doctor and patient may see a lot of each other. It is important that the two have a good relationship. This way the patient feels comfortable going to his or her doctor with any concerns about treatment. A familiarity between the doctor and patient will help the doctor diagnose changes in the patient's behavior or attitude that might indicate a problem with the bipolar treatment.

If a patient feels that his or her doctor is not listening to his/her concerns about treatment or medications, the patient should express this clearly. If things do not change, it might be best to find another doctor. Patients need to feel that their doctors will listen to their concerns and also need to feel open and comfortable in talking with their doctors.

Bipolar disorder is an illness that can greatly affect a person's life, but it doesn't have to be that way. Managing bipolar disorder is possible and with new medication and research, it is easier today than it has been in the past.

Recommended links to learn more

[The National Institute on Mental Health publishes an excellent booklet on bipolar disorder. It can be found at \[www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/bipolar.cfm\]\(http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/bipolar.cfm\)](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/bipolar.cfm)

[This site has good and to-the-point information on bipolar disorder](http://bipolartreatment.com/) and useful information on medications – if you click on the Bipolar Medications link on the left of the main page -- <http://bipolartreatment.com/>