

Background Information on Bipolar Disorder

What is Bipolar Disorder?

- Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic-depressive illness, is a complex mental illness characterized by debilitating swings in mood. These swings range from manic episodes, marked by abnormal euphoria, elation and irritability, to episodes of deep depression, marked by extreme sadness and difficulty functioning. These periods of illness are interspersed with periods of normal mood.¹
- Although a life long illness, bipolar disorder typically emerges in adolescence or young adulthood, and episodes continue intermittently throughout life.²

Causes of Bipolar Disorder

- The exact cause of bipolar is unknown. What is known, however, is that genetic, environmental, and biochemical factors each play a role.³ Evidence suggests that the illness runs in families, but that body chemistry can bring on a depressive or manic episode, due to the presence of another illness, stress, substance abuse, or hormonal changes. Traumatic life events may also trigger some symptoms.⁴ Current research is underway to find out how different causes of bipolar disorder relate to each other for different individuals.¹

Prevalence

- More than two million Americans live with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder,¹ although recent research indicates the real number may be as high as 10 million. An estimated 25 to 50 percent of patients with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once,⁵ and 20 percent actually succeed.⁶

Symptoms

- The symptoms of bipolar disorder are varied and include symptoms of mania and depression.¹

Symptoms of Mania	Symptoms of Depression
Heightened mood, exaggerated optimism and self confidence	Prolonged sadness or unexplained crying spells
Decreased need for sleep without experiencing fatigue	Significant changes in appetite and sleep patterns
Grandiose delusions, inflated sense of self-importance	Irritability, anger, worry, agitation, anxiety
Excessive irritability, aggressive behavior	Pessimism, indifference
Increased physical and mental activity	Loss of energy, persistent lethargy
Racing speech, flight of ideas, impulsiveness	Feelings of guilt and worthlessness
Poor judgement, easily distracted	Inability to concentrate, indecisiveness
Reckless behavior such as spending sprees, rash business decisions, sexual indiscretions	Inability to take pleasure in former interests, social withdrawal
Delusions, in the most severe cases	Unexplained aches and pains
	Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

Types of Bipolar Episodes

- Over the course of bipolar disorder, four different kinds of mood episodes can occur. These include:³
 - Mania (manic episode)—may include delusions
 - Hypomania (hypomanic episode)—a milder form of mania; during these episodes, patients often feel good and may even stop their medication
 - Major depression (major depressive episode)—person may feel sad or hopeless
 - Mixed episode—involves symptoms of both mania and clinical depression occurring simultaneously

Difficulty of Diagnosis

- Bipolar disorder can be extremely difficult to diagnose and treat, in part because a single individual can present to their physician with different symptoms at different times. A person with the disorder typically sees three to four doctors and spends more than eight years seeking treatment before receiving the correct diagnosis.⁷
- People with bipolar disorder often seek treatment during the depressive phase of the illness, but are less likely to consult a healthcare professional during a manic episode, increasing the difficulty for physicians in diagnosing the disorder.

Treatment

- When properly diagnosed, bipolar disorder can be treated. People with the disorder can lead normal, productive lives with the right medication, talk therapy and social support.¹ Individuals with bipolar disorder, however, often suffer great stigma, which not only can stop them from seeking treatment, but can affect their employment status, interpersonal relationships and overall quality of life.⁴
- Although there is no cure for bipolar disorder, it can be successfully managed. If left untreated, bipolar disorder tends to worsen, and patients experience increasingly frequent and severe episodes of mania and depression. People with bipolar disorder may require hospitalization to enable them to return to a normal level of behavior and functioning.³

References:

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