

Fact Sheet: Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depression, is a type of mental illness that involves a disorder of affect or mood. The person's mood usually swings between overly "high" or irritable to sad and hopeless, and then back again, with periods of normal mood in between.

Symptoms include:

- Extreme irritability and distractibility
- Excessive "high" or euphoric feelings
- Increased energy, activity, restlessness
- Racing thoughts, rapid speech
- Decreased need for sleep
- Unrealistic beliefs in one's abilities and powers
- Increased sexual drive
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol
- Reckless behavior such as spending sprees, rash business decisions, or erratic driving
- In severe cases, hallucinations and loss of reason

Mental health specialists refer to bipolar disorder by type: Type I bipolar disorder involves extreme upswings in mood (mania) coupled with downward spirals. In Type II, the upward swings are more mild (hypomania), but the frequency and intensity of the depressive phase is often severe. Since the elevated mood states of Type II are relatively mild, they are often missed and the bipolar nature of the illness goes undiagnosed.

Who is Affected by Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder affects more than 2.5 million adult Americans every year. (National Institute of Mental Health)

- Up to 90 percent of bipolar disorders start before age 20, although the illness can start in early childhood or as late as the 40's and 50's. An equal number of men and women develop bipolar illness and it is found in all ages, races, ethnic groups and social classes.
- More than two-thirds of people with bipolar disorder have at least one close relative with the illness or with unipolar major depression, indicating that the disease has a heritable component. (National Institute of Mental Health)

- People with bipolar disorder will spend as much as one-fourth of their adult lives in the hospital, and they will live one-fourth of their adult lives disabled. This can result in the person's losing as much as 14 years of cumulative productivity. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Women and Bipolar Disorder

- Although bipolar disorder is equally common in women and men, research indicates that approximately three times as many women as men experience rapid cycling. (Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 58, 1995 [Suppl.15])
- Other research findings indicate that women with bipolar disorder may have more depressive episodes and more mixed episodes than do men with the illness. (Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 58, 1995 [Suppl.15])

Economic Factors

- Bipolar disorder is the sixth leading cause of disability in the world. (World Health Organization)

Suicide and Bipolar Disorder

- Bipolar disorder results in 9.2 years reduction in expected life span, and as many as one in five patients with bipolar disorder completes suicide. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Children and Adolescents

- Bipolar disorder is more likely to affect the children of parents who have the disorder. When one parent has bipolar disorder, the risk to each child is 15 to 30%. When both parents have bipolar disorder, the risk increases to 50 to 75%. (National Institute of Mental Health)
- Some 20% of adolescents with major depression develop bipolar disorder within five years of the onset of depression. (Birmaher, B., "Childhood and Adolescent Depression: A Review of the Past 10 Years." Part I, 1995)
- Up to one-third of the 3.4 million children and adolescents with depression in the United States may actually be experiencing the early onset of bipolar disorder. (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997)
- When manic, children and adolescents, in contrast to adults, are more likely to be irritable and prone to destructive outbursts than to be elated or euphoric. When depressed, there may be many physical complaints such as headaches, and stomachaches or tiredness; poor performance in school, irritability, social isolation, and extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure. (National Institute of Mental Health).