

What exactly is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar Disorder, which used to be called “Manic Depression”, is a serious mental illness that occurs in about two percent of the population. It most often begins in the early 20s for both men and women and recurs throughout the lifespan.

Although there are seven subtypes of Bipolar Disorder listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the major feature of the illness is that a person experiences severe mood changes that qualify as clinical depression and mania. Thus, the name Bipolar means “two poles” referring to two very different states of mood. People who have one episode of Bipolar illness most likely will have others if they do not seek professional help. The illness tends to run in families. While many people have heard of depression, few know or understand the meaning of the term “mania”.

Believe me, if you had ever encountered someone in the middle of a manic episode, you would remember it. People with mania are typically distractible, hyperactive, overconfident, elated (or irritable) and full of grandiose plans. They may engage in goal-directed activity, need less sleep and are way more talkative than usual, sometimes to the point of overwhelming their listeners with words. They often describe their thoughts as racing so fast that they cannot keep track of them. They are nearly impossible to interrupt and their ideas are only loosely connected as they may jump from one topic to the next. Excessive engagement in pleasurable activities that have a high cost (such as shopping sprees, gambling, unethical or criminal behavior, sexual indiscretions, foolish business ventures) is another symptom of mania. The person with mania is frequently oblivious to the effects of their appearance and behavior and any attempt to stop or redirect them can bring abrupt anger or rage reactions. In some cases the manic person becomes hostile or threatening and some develop symptoms of thought disorder (such as delusions, which are false beliefs or hallucinations, which are false perceptions;) and even become assaultive or suicidal. Mania typically begins suddenly, over a day or two, and untreated episodes can last from a few days to several months. To qualify as manic though, this mood state must last at least one week and it cannot be due to drug use or a medical condition such as hyperthyroidism.

Clinical depression is the other mood “pole” experienced by the person with Bipolar Disorder. The symptoms of major depression are a deeply sad mood with disturbances of weight, appetite, sleep and activity level. It is one of the most

common mental disorders: 5 to 12 percent of men and 10 to 25 percent of women will be clinically depressed at least once in their lives.

One issue that makes Bipolar Disorder confusing is that we all have mood swings (especially adolescents!) and moody people are often labeled as bipolar when in fact they are not. Another complicating factor is reaching the correct diagnosis. Bipolar Disorder can be diagnosed if a person has the depressive episode first, the manic episode first, the mania and depression at the same time or even a manic episode without the depression! Confusing huh?

The best treatment for Bipolar Disorder begins with a careful evaluation and proper diagnosis. Medication is critical but the combination of therapy AND medication offers the best long-term chance of success. Additionally, Bipolar Disorder often devastates the lives of the afflicted person and their families. Attending a support group in person or through the Internet can be another critical piece of successful treatment and encouragement. In Corsicana the Navarro County Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance meets every Tuesday night at 6:30 p.m. in the fellowship hall of St. John's Episcopal Church, 101 N. 14th St. For more information, call (903) 872-6302 or (903) 874-6815.

Reference: American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 2000.