Bipolar Disorder

Sarah Mae Sincero

Bipolar disorder is a mental health illness featuring cycles of abnormally high energy levels and elated mood (mania) and extremely low self-esteem and consistent sad mood (depression). Bipolar disorder is also known as manic-depressive illness.

Bipolar disorder is beyond normal ups and downs. This long-term psychiatric disorder causes difficulties at work or school, and inflicts damage to social relationships.

**Signs and Symptoms**

Dramatic mood swings are the most apparent features of bipolar disorder. From abnormally high, open elated mood to hopeless and sad mood and back again, bipolar disorder happens in a cyclic order. In between episodes of mania and depression comes periods of normal mood.

A bipolar patient in a manic episode shows increased energy levels, restlessness, extreme irritability, highly euphoric mood, fast talking, racing thoughts, flight of ideas, lack of concentration, easy distractibility, increased sexual drive, poor judgement, little sleep needed and provocative or aggressive behavior. To be classified as a manic episode, the patient must have an elevated mood associated with 3 or more of these symptoms, lasting for a day or longer.

When in a depressive episode, the patient experiences five or more of the following signs and symptoms lasting for most of the day or longer: lasting sad, 'empty', or anxious mood, pessimism, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness or guilt, loss of pleasure or interest in previously enjoyed activities such as sex, sports or hobbies, poor concentration, decreased energy levels, feeling of fatigue, too much or too little sleep, appetite changes, weight loss or weight gain and suicidal ideations or attempts.

During severe manic and depressive episodes, symptoms of psychosis may arise. The bipolar patient may experience delusions (particularly delusions of grandeur or unrealistic belief of having supernatural abilities or wealth during manic episode) and hallucinations (sensing something that is not actually there, e.g. "I see ants crawling all over my body.")

**Biological Basis**

Heredity is found to be one of the major causes of bipolar disorder. Scientists found out that bipolar disorder does not only tend to run in families, but also in identical twins. However, the specific genes that may raise the possibility of a person to have bipolar disorder are not yet discovered by researchers. Chemical imbalance in the brain may also be a possible cause of bipolar disorder. Excessive levels of norepinephrine may lead to manic episodes, whereas abnormally low levels of this neurotransmitter may cause depressive episodes.

**Treatment**

Management of bipolar disorder includes the administration of mood stabilizers like lithium. Severe symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions are managed through antipsychotic medication. As bipolar disorder is a long-term, recurrent illness, frequent counselling and psychotherapeutic sessions are needed.

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