

Bipolar disorder in young people



What this fact sheet covers:

- Signs of bipolar disorder in young people
- Management of bipolar disorder
- How to help a young person with bipolar disorder
- Where to get more information

Introduction

Bipolar disorder is a neglected health problem in children and adolescents. Formerly known as Manic Depression, bipolar disorder has only recently been recognised in children and young people.

The highest rate of bipolar disorder is found in those under the age of 30 years. Bipolar disorder commonly emerges in mid to late adolescence (15-18 years old).

Signs of bipolar disorder in young people

Bipolar disorder can be difficult to recognise in young people as the illness can be 'hidden' by significant behavioural problems such as irritability and aggression.

Signs of bipolar disorder in young people may include:

- Rapidly changing moods lasting a few hours to a few days

- Explosive tantrums or rages
- Impulsivity or racing thoughts
- Excessive involvement in multiple projects or activities
- Family history (bipolar disorder or depression)
- Poor sleep patterns or nightmares
- Excessive cravings – usually for carbohydrates or sweets
- Risky or inappropriate behaviours

Management of bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder is an illness that requires long term treatment. There are serious risks to delaying diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder in young people. Social/peer relations, academic performance, family relationships and psychological maturation are all affected by bipolar disorder (both highs and lows).

There is currently no known cure for bipolar disorder. However, with proper treatment bipolar disorder can be effectively controlled.



A good management plan for young people with bipolar disorder may include:

- medication
- close monitoring of symptoms
- education about the illness
- counselling or psychotherapy for the individual and family
- stress reduction
- good nutrition
- regular sleep and exercise: see our Fact Sheet Exercise and Depression
- participation in a support network
- mood charting – you can download from our website at: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au (Fact Sheets)

The sooner a management plan is put in place the less frequent and intense the episodes can be.

How to help a young person with bipolar disorder

Adolescence can be a tumultuous time for young people. Young people with bipolar disorder may not understand what is happening to them or may think that the highs and lows of bipolar disorder are simply part of growing up. Young people may need help recognising that their mood swings may be related to bipolar disorder.

- Talk to the young person and let them know that you are concerned.
- Help the young person identify possible

contributing factors for why they may feel unwell i.e. stress, exams, drugs, situations at home.

- Recommend an assessment by a GP.
- After seeing a GP, the young person may be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist; let the young person know that they can bring a friend or family member along for support.
- If the young person is prescribed a treatment plan or medication, assist them in closely following the instructions.

Where to get more information

A **Daily Mood Graph** and other relevant Fact Sheets can be downloaded from our website at: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/factsheets.

Mastering Bipolar Disorder: an insider's guide to managing mood swings and finding balance, Kerrie Eyers & Gordon Parker (2008) Allen & Unwin.

1800 011 511 Mental Health Line is a NSW Government phone service operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will provide a telephone triage assessment and referral service staffed by mental health clinicians.

Contact Us

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