



Depression and Bipolar Disorder

We all experience changes in mood. Times of sadness or disappointment are natural reactions to the difficulties that occur in our lives. The loss of a loved one, problems at work or a deteriorating relationship can cause us to feel depressed. Similarly, a great success or relief from a problem makes us feel happy and content.

Our moods tend to be varied and shifting, but generally we feel as though we have some control over them. However, for people with mood disorders like depression and bipolar disorder, that sense of control is missing and that causes distress. Anyone who has experienced depression or a manic episode can readily tell you the difference between those illnesses and their own normal feelings of sadness or happiness.

Severe or prolonged depression is an illness that affects not only a person's emotions, but also physical health, relationships and behaviour. At any given time, almost 3 million Canadians have serious depression. It is about twice as common in women.

Bipolar disorder, also called manic depression, is an illness in which there are periods of serious depression, followed by episodes of markedly elevated or irritable moods or "highs" (in the absence of drugs or alcohol). These mood swings are not necessarily related to events in the person's life. Bipolar disorder affects approximately 1% of the population; it typically starts in late adolescence or early adulthood and affects men and women equally.

Depression and bipolar disorder can be treated. There is good reason for hope. By learning more about these conditions, you can help remove the stigma that prevents many people from seeking help.

Bipolar Disorder

People with bipolar disorder, or manic depressive disorder, experience alternating mood swings, from emotional highs (mania) to lows (depression). The condition can range from mild to severe.

It is not known what causes bipolar disorder. Research suggests that people with the condition have a genetic disposition. It tends to run in families. Drug abuse and stressful or traumatic events may contribute to or trigger episodes.

Symptoms of mania include:

- Feelings of euphoria, extreme optimism, exaggerated self-esteem
- Rapid speech, racing thoughts
- Decreased need for sleep
- Extreme irritability
- Impulsive and potentially reckless behaviour

Symptoms of the depression phase are the same as in major depression, described above.

Treatment is Available

Depression and bipolar disorder are treatable. Learning to recognize the signs and triggers enables people to work with their doctors, other health professionals, family and friends to prevent recurrences from becoming severe.

The great majority of depressed people respond to treatment and nearly all who seek treatment will get some relief from their symptoms. Both medication and some forms of counselling or psychotherapy have been demonstrated to be effective.

Bipolar disorder is mainly treated with medication and psychotherapy. Medication helps to stabilize moods, while therapy helps people detect patterns and triggers and develop strategies for managing stress. Sometimes, electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT, is used.

What Can I Do?

Many people do not seek help for depression or bipolar disorder, sometimes because their symptoms prevent them from recognizing the seriousness of their situation. It can also result from the stigma that surrounds both these conditions, making people feel like they are weak or at fault. It is important to know that depression and bipolar disorder are treatable. Friends and family can be supportive by learning all they can about the condition affecting their loved one. You can learn more from support groups and community health associations.

Where To Go For More Information

For further information, contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) to find out about support and resources in your community.