

The Importance Of Understanding Bipolar Disorder

(NAPS)—It's an illness that nearly half of the general public has never heard of. Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depression, affects as many as 10 million Americans. Due to the public's lack of awareness, many people struggle with the disorder, not knowing that they have a medical illness and that help is available.

As some of the symptoms of bipolar disorder are similar to those of major depression, people are frequently misdiagnosed and consequently receive treatments that can worsen their illness. Nearly 70 percent of people with bipolar disorder are misdiagnosed at least once and it can take up to ten years and visits to more than four doctors before a patient receives an accurate diagnosis. Therefore, it is important to discuss all symptoms with a doctor and share your family history, to ensure that a proper diagnosis is made. Once an appropriate course of treatment is established, it is vital that patients work with their doctor and loved ones to adhere to their treatment plan.

Bipolar disorder is characterized by periods of mania, depression and also wellness. Common symptoms of mania include increased physical and mental activity, heightened self-confidence, rapid speech, decreased need for sleep and excessive spending. Symptoms of depression include unexplained crying, irritability, feelings of worthlessness, loss of energy and recurring thoughts of death or suicide. Bipolar disorder can run in families.

"Putting the pieces together and recognizing that your symptoms are related can be difficult," said Lydia Lewis, president of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA). "Just remember that every piece of information you share with your doctor about



what you're experiencing can help solve the puzzle."

Through proper diagnosis and treatment, people with bipolar disorder can lead healthy, productive lives. "The key is staying on your treatment, even during times when you feel well," said Robert Hirschfeld, M.D., Titus H. Harris Chair and Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. Successful treatment includes a combination of medication, talk therapy and participation in support groups. Medication helps relieve symptoms of bipolar disorder, while talk therapy can help patients restore relationships affected by their illness and helps them rebuild a healthy lifestyle. DBSA's more than 1,000 support groups provide a safe place for patients and their family members to share their experiences.

As many as one in five people with the illness commit suicide, making it extremely important for family members to be able to recognize symptoms of bipolar disorder and encourage their loved one to seek treatment. For more information about bipolar disorder or to find a support group in your area, contact the DBSA at 800-826-3632, or visit www.DBSAlliance.org.