

Mental Health Matters in the Workplace!



Bipolar Disorder in the Workplace

Prevalence

More than 2 million Americans suffer from bipolar disorder, **including 22,564 residents of East Tennessee!** In a workplace of 1,000 employees, approximately 26 suffer from bipolar disorder. Without treatment, bipolar disorder can be very distressing for those who have the disease and their friends, family, and employers.

Bipolar disorder typically begins in adolescence or early adulthood and continues throughout life. It is often not recognized as an illness and people who have it may suffer needlessly for years. Although there is no known cure, bipolar disorder is treatable, and recovery is possible. Individuals with bipolar disorder have successful relationships and meaningful jobs. The combination of medications and psychotherapy helps the vast majority of people return to productive, fulfilling lives.

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is an illness involving one or more episodes of serious mania and depression. The illness causes a person's mood to swing from excessively "high" and/or irritable to sad and hopeless, with periods of a normal mood in between.

Symptoms of mania

The symptoms of mania, which can last up to three months if untreated, include:

- Excessive energy, activity, restlessness, racing thoughts and rapid talking
- Denial that anything is wrong
- Extreme "high" or euphoric feelings
- Easily irritated or distracted
- Decreased need for sleep
- Unrealistic beliefs in one's ability; over ambitious work plans and the belief that nothing can stop him or her from accomplishing any task
- Uncharacteristically poor judgment
- Abuse of drugs, particularly cocaine, alcohol or sleeping medications
- Provocative, intrusive, or aggressive behavior -- a person may become enraged or paranoid if his or her grand ideas are stopped or excessive social plans are refused

Symptoms of Depression

Some people experience periods of normal mood and behavior following a manic phase, however, the depressive phase will eventually appear. Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Change in appetite
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Irritability or restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment (such as chronic pain or digestive disorders)
- Thoughts of death or suicide, including suicide attempts
- Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless

Impact in the Workplace

Untreated Bipolar Disorder has an impact on the employee and employer. One National Institutes of Health sponsored study carried out by Harvard University suggests that bipolar disorder costs twice as much in lost productivity as major depressive disorder. Workers suffering from bipolar disorder averaged 65.5 lost work days per year while workers with depression averaged 27.2 lost work days per year.

One factor leading to the increase in loss of work days could be the difficulty in diagnosing bipolar disorder. Often, an employee may present with symptoms of depression first. If these symptoms are treated with anti-depressants, the medication can trigger the onset of mania. Dr. Phillip Wang, of Harvard University suggests that workplace programs should first rule out the possibility that a depressive episode may be due to bipolar disorder. The sooner that an employee gets an accurate diagnosis is made, the sooner the employee can receive the proper treatment and get on the road to recovery.

Impact for the Employee

According to *Forbes* employees with bipolar disorder have a tough choice to make; do they disclose their illness or not? The advantage of disclosing a diagnosis of bipolar disorder is that an employee can ask for reasonable accommodations in the office such as a change in work hours or environment. However, the stigma of mental illness is real and many people are treated differently by employers and coworkers because of their illness.

Many employers do not understand that bipolar disorder doesn't necessarily inhibit a person's career. One survey conducted by the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University found that 73% of professionals previously diagnosed with a mental illness were able to keep full-time employment in their field of work. In fact,

for many, work can serve as a stable factor in a person's life that can help steady the mood swings.

Treatment

Treatment is critical for recovery. A combination of medication, professional help and support from family, friends and peers help individuals with bipolar disorder stabilize their emotions and behavior.

Most people with bipolar disorder can be treated with medication. It is suggested that those with bipolar disorder receive guidance, education and support from a mental health professional to help deal with personal relationships, maintain a healthy self-image and ensure compliance with his or her treatment.

Support and self-help groups are also an invaluable resource for learning coping skills, feeling acceptance and avoiding social isolation. Friends and family should join a support group to better understand the illness so that they can continue to offer encouragement and support to their loved ones.

For More Information:

Contact the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee at 865-584-9125.

The Mental Health Association offers equally all services to eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin or disability.

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