

**Question: My 22-year-old daughter recently was told by our family doctor that she may have a mental health condition called bipolar disorder. She has been referred to a psychiatrist but has not yet made an appointment. How can we help our daughter get control of her life?**

**Answer:** Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. These mood shifts are different from the normal ups and downs everyone goes through from time to time.

Bipolar disorder often develops in a person's late teens or early adult years. At least half of all cases start before age 25. Some people have their first symptoms during childhood, while others may develop symptoms later in life.

Bipolar disorder is not easy to spot when it starts. The symptoms may seem like separate problems and not recognized as parts of a larger problem. Some people suffer for years before they are properly diagnosed and treated. Like diabetes or heart disease, bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout a person's life.

People with bipolar disorder experience unusually intense emotional states that occur in distinct periods called "mood episodes." An overly joyful or overexcited state is called a manic episode, and an extremely sad or hopeless state is called a depressive episode. Sometimes, a mood episode includes symptoms of both mania and depression. People with bipolar disorder also may be explosive and irritable during a mood episode. Extreme changes in energy, activity, sleep and behavior go along with these changes in mood. It is possible for someone with bipolar disorder to experience a long-lasting period of unstable mood rather than discrete episodes of depression or mania. Bipolar disorder symptoms can result in damaged relationships, affect job or school performance, and even lead to suicide. But bipolar disorder can be treated and people with this illness can lead full and productive lives.

A bipolar disorder affects you and members of your family. The first and most important thing you can do is help your daughter get the right diagnosis and treatment. You may need to make the appointment and go with her to see a qualified mental health provider. To date, there is no cure for bipolar disorder. Because bipolar disorder is a lifelong and recurrent illness, people with the disorder need long-term treatment to maintain control of bipolar symptoms. An effective maintenance treatment plan includes medication and psychotherapy for preventing relapse and reducing symptom severity. Proper treatment helps most people with bipolar disorder gain better control of their mood swings and related symptoms. This also is true for people with the most severe form of the illness.

Next, encourage your loved one to stay in treatment. Offer emotional support, understanding, patience and encouragement. Many families can help by learning the signs that indicate an episode is beginning and develop a plan that may help the individual deescalate behaviors before they become too overwhelming. Learn about bipolar disorder so you can understand what your daughter is experiencing. Listen to the feelings your daughter expresses, be understanding about situations that may trigger bipolar symptoms, and never ignore comments about her harming herself.

Questions about bipolar disorder may be directed to the COMCARE Intake and Assessment Center (first appointment) at 316-660-7540 or for mental health emergencies call 316-660-7500 24 hours a day, seven days a week.