

Bipolar - What You Need to Know to Start Helping Your Clients



by Fiona Cooper - National Development Manager

Celebrities as diverse as Stephen Fry, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Bill Oddie and 'Shameless' author Paul Abbott have helped to reduce the stigma attached to bipolar disorder by speaking publicly about their battles with the illness. But it remains a much misunderstood and devastating illness.

Bipolar - sometimes known as manic depression - is a severe mental health illness. It is characterised by significant mood swings including manic highs and depressive lows, which the majority of people who have the illness experience as alternating episodes of mania and depression. Between 1% and 2% of the population have bipolar and it is important to remember that tens of thousands of those with the illness are highly successful and valued members of the workforce.

Both males and females of any age and from any social or ethnic background can develop the illness. It can occur when work, studies, family or emotional pressures are at their greatest. In women it can also be triggered by childbirth or during the menopause.

Bipolar increases the risk of suicide by up to 20 times.

Currently, the keys to managing bipolar are an early diagnosis, acceptance of the illness and adapting one's lifestyle to take control as much as possible using strategies involving medication, health care, therapy and self-management.

Bipolar UK is the national charity dedicated to supporting individuals with this much misunderstood and life-threatening condition. We are service-user led. Last year we reached out to and supported 65,000 people and our figures indicate that we will exceed that number this year.

We provide a range of services that enable people affected by bipolar to manage their illness and thus take control of their lives. We:

- host over 120 self-help groups in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- support self-management
- host a vibrant e-community which provides a forum where members can express and share their views and experiences

- work directly with psychiatric units in pioneering projects in England Wales
- provide awareness training for companies and organisations, which may be of particular interest to Welfare Officers
- run London Youth - working with and supporting young people 18-25 years of age who are affected by bipolar

We also work to combat the stigma and prejudice associated with bipolar disorder. We produce a selection of information and guidance publications, we campaign for research into treatment.

Key Facts:

It takes an average of 10.5 years to receive a correct diagnosis for bipolar in the UK. Misdiagnosis occurs on average 3.5 times.

1% to 2% of the population experience a lifetime prevalence of bipolar disorder. Recent research suggests as many as 5% of the population are on the bipolar spectrum.

The impact and devastation of bipolar are not about the sufferer alone. Including parents and partners for example, bipolar affects over 3 million people in the UK today.

Compared to other health problems that have a similar or lower impact, treatment of bipolar is still hampered by misunderstanding and severe stigma.

Bipolar impacts every aspect of our lives. Marriages, families and friendships can be placed under significant pressure and day-to-day living can at times seem an impossibility

The key to coping with bipolar is an early diagnosis. Acceptance of the illness and adapting your lifestyle so you are in control of the illness as much as possible. Management of the illness can be achieved through strategies involving medication, health care, therapy and self-management.

Bipolar UK's income comes mostly from voluntary donations. Our website sets out a range of ways that individuals, groups and companies can raise money to help us support people with bipolar. Please visit us at www.bipolaruk.org.uk