

PULSE

Bipolar disorder can make holidays more difficult

For most of us, the holiday season can be a very stressful time. For those suffering from bipolar disorder, it can be even more difficult. The challenges of family dynamics, unmet expectations and financial pressure can stir up feelings of loneliness and isolation and aggravate the symptoms of bipolar depression.

What is bipolar disorder? Formerly called manic depression, bipolar disorder is a mental illness that brings severe high and low moods and changes in sleep, energy, thinking and behavior. Some of the symptoms of the disorder include

- sadness and depression
- irritability
- insomnia
- rapid speech and poor concentration
- feelings of hopelessness
- withdrawal and isolation
- sudden changes in mood
- lack of basic grooming (such as bathing, washing hair, etc.)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, bipolar disorder affects approximately 2.6 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older every year. When these symptoms are not addressed properly, those

suffering from the disorder can experience further mental deterioration, impacting their jobs and families, or they may try to self-medicate, turning to drugs or alcohol to dull the pain of their mental anxiety.

While bipolar disorder can be scary, according to Elise Matthei, team leader for the OPTIONS Mental Health Program at AMITA Health Adventist Medical Center in Hinsdale, there are tools to successfully treat and manage symptoms associated with the illness.

“It takes the right combination of both medication and counseling to help those suffering from episodes of severe bipolar disorder,” Matthei said. “I’ve seen those afflicted with the illness return to happy, productive lives when given the caring treatment they need, matching the therapy program and prescription dosage to the individual.”

A patient we’ll call Jane is one of the many success stories that show the positive results that can occur when those with bipolar dis-



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On mental health

order receive appropriate treatment. A 55-year-old woman, Jane’s episode began with the loss of a job she had held for 21 years. This led to depression and feelings of hopelessness. As these feelings continued to deteriorate, Jane began to self-medicate, causing her to further disconnect from society. Jane’s physical condition began to mirror her mental health, and she

stopped taking care of her appearance. The episode culminated in a drug overdose that sent Jane into the hospital for emergency treatment.

Jane remained in the hospital until her physical condition was stabilized. At the same time, she received counseling to help address her acute mental state. Jane was then transitioned into the OPTIONS outpatient program, where she worked with a team of experienced counselors and an advanced practice nurse to help identify and address the events triggering her depression. They also determined appropriate medication levels to support her mental well-being.

After three weeks, Jane was successfully discharged with plans to continue her recovery by following-up on her program with regular therapeutic check-ins and medication management. Today, Jane has a more positive outlook and is currently seasonally employed while searching for a full-time position. In her last Aftercare meeting Jane reported on her condition.

“I have experienced a day of peace without racing thoughts and that hasn’t happened in years,” she said.

Jane is also volunteering in her community and is engaged in supporting other patients facing similar mental health challenges.

If you think you or someone you love may be suffering from bipolar disorder, seek help from a mental health professional. With the aid of proven effective tools and therapies, you or your loved one can find relief from mental distress and return to a life in balance.

— by Nancy Munroe, a psychiatric nurse practitioner with Salt Creek Therapy Group who works with the OPTIONS outpatient behavioral medicine program.