

LIVING WITH DRAMATIC MOOD SWINGS

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We all have mood changes from time to time, but some people have a disorder which causes mood swings which can be extreme enough to disrupt their lives, sometimes interfering with work and relationships.

The problem, once called manic-depression, is now known as bi-polar disorder. People who have the disorder have times when they feel unusually elated and overactive. This type of mood is called "mania".

"At first it feels wonderful. I feel very happy and spiritual. But I also feel very driven," says Sue, who has had episodes of the disorder for the last 20 years. "It's as if everything has speeded up and I feel I must do everything straight away."

During one very severe bout of "mania", she was unable to work. "I just couldn't do my normal job because I couldn't follow a routine. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat and I was very irritable," she remembers.

Like many people with bi-polar disorder she also had unusual beliefs. She was convinced she was communicating with a deity. It's quite common for people in a "manic" state to believe they are very gifted or important - they may believe they are royalty, or film stars or important religious figures. They may also act in a reckless, irrational way.

The other type of mood that is part of this illness is very different. It's just the opposite. Instead of feeling elated, the person feels very depressed, losing interest and pleasure in normal activities. They may

withdraw from friends and family, lose their appetite, and even stop doing normal, everyday things such as shopping or showering.

"It can have a terrible affect on relationships," says Sue. "You no longer feel connected to other people. It's as if there's a glass wall between you and everyone else."

In extreme cases these feelings of depression drive people to suicide.

Like most other types of mental illness, bi-polar disorder can be treated, enabling people with the problem to live a normal life. Although they may have periods of extreme mood swings, they also have normal moods too and, like Sue, most are able to lead a normal, productive life with a job and a relationship.

Bi-polar disorder, which affects both men and women, is most common in people in their 20s. The cause seems to be a combination of things including heredity (children of parents with bi-polar disorder have a greater risk of developing the problem) and a chemical imbalance in the brain. The problem is sometimes triggered by stress and can be influenced by the seasons - mania is more common in spring and depression more common in winter.

It is always good to remember that mental disorders of all kinds are usually treatable. If you know someone who has symptoms of bi-polar disorder or any other mental illness, there's always someone who can help. To find a health professional who speaks your language, ring Anna at the Transcultural Mental health Centre on (02) 840 3800 or 1800 648 911 (toll free), or write to PO Box 2008, North Parramatta 2151.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.