

## **Erasing the Stigma: Bipolar Disorder**

Bipolar Disorder is a mental illness that affects mood, where people experience episodes of depression and mania. Mania is described as periods of great excitement, where they may feel like their thoughts are racing, may feel hyperactive and are not sleeping very much. Bipolar Disorder can affect anyone. With 1% of Canadians experiencing Bipolar Disorder in their lifetime and the suicide rate being 2-3 times higher than the general population. In Canada, on average a person will see 4 doctors before getting the correct diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder. They will also spend 8 years seeking help before they are successful.

A stigma surrounds this illness because it is misunderstood by the general public who may perceive Bipolar Disorder as an emotional shortcoming instead of a serious physical illness, like heart disease, cancer or diabetes. This stigma may prevent those with Bipolar Disorder from seeking appropriate medical attention. The misconceptions surrounding bipolar disorder are many, and until they are dispelled, stigma will continue to cause people to suffer alone. Hesitant to admit they have a mental illness. Individuals with Bipolar Disorder are real people, with feelings and hopes and dreams that are bigger than the disorder. They can't "get over it," or "suck it up" or "snap out of it." While some disorders are temporary, many are not, and it may take a lifetime of medication and other measures to control the symptoms. Like someone with a chronic physical illness such as diabetes, individuals with a Bipolar Disorder diagnosis have to make a conscious effort to be well.