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BIPOLAR DISORDER IN THE WORKPLACE: CLINICAL INSIGHTS AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bipolar disorder is a multifaceted mental health condition that significantly impacts individuals' functioning in various life domains, including the workplace. With growing awareness of mental health, it's imperative that health professionals gain a nuanced understanding of bipolar disorder's presentation and implications in occupational settings. This article explores the types of bipolar

disorder, symptom manifestation in professional contexts, stigma, legal protections, and strategies for creating inclusive work environments.

Types of Bipolar Disorder and Workplace Presentation

While academic literature describes up to six types of bipolar disorder, clinically three forms are most relevant: bipolar I,

bipolar II, and cyclothymia. Bipolar I and II have major depressive episodes in common. Bipolar I includes manic episodes - severe mood dysregulation with increased talkativeness, energy, decreased need for sleep, and productivity. Bipolar II involves hypomanic episodes, which are less severe and can often be missed because they appear as slight changes from normal,

such as increased productivity or sociability.

Cyclothymia represents a milder, chronic form with depressive and hypomanic symptoms that don't meet full diagnostic criteria but persist over time.

Media depictions misrepresent the lived experience of bipolar disorder. People with bipolar disorder often spend more than 50% of their episodes in major depressive states—not the manic or hypomanic episodes that Hollywood dramatises. This understanding is essential when assessing workplace impact, where depressive symptoms often cause the greatest functional impairment.

Impact on Work Performance and Relationships

The effects of bipolar disorder on occupational functioning vary by phase. During hypomania, individuals may be more productive, talkative, and social - sometimes even exceeding expectations, which is why this phase is often missed. However, in full manic episodes, there can be impulsivity, risky decision-making, and irritability, which may lead to conflicts with colleagues and difficulty adhering to workplace norms.

Conversely, depressive episodes typically manifest as struggles to get out of bed, lack of motivation, poor concentration, fatigue, and reduced ability to perform routine tasks.

Bipolar mood disorder does not equal dysfunction. Many individuals with well-managed bipolar disorder function highly and achieve in the workplace. The challenge lies in managing episodic symptoms without compromising performance or relationships.

Workplace Environments and Challenges

Routine and stability are key to

managing bipolar disorder, and certain work environments can pose greater challenges. Shift work and night shifts disrupt circadian rhythms, which are critical for mood regulation. High-stress environments like emergency services or finance, long hours, and jobs involving multiple time zones make managing the disorder more difficult.

It's important to consider the "fit" between the individual's condition and the job's demands. Just like choosing the right school for a child, it's important to evaluate if a workplace environment is suitable for someone living with bipolar disorder.

Stigma and Misconceptions

Stigma remains a pervasive barrier. A big misconception is that anyone with mood swings has bipolar disorder. But bipolar disorder also affects cognition, behaviour, and energy—not just mood. Another damaging myth is that people with bipolar disorder are unreliable and incapable of maintaining employment. With proper management and support, individuals with bipolar disorder can be highly functional.

Fear of disclosure due to stigma discourages open communication. Employees worry about being perceived as incompetent or being discriminated against. This fear can prevent them from seeking accommodations or support.

Legal Protections

In South Africa, several laws protect employees with bipolar disorder:

- The **Employment Equity Act** safeguards against unfair discrimination based on disability or medical condition.
- The **Labour Relations Act** prevents dismissal due to medical or mental health conditions.

- The **Occupational Health and Safety Act** requires reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

Many employees are unaware of their rights under these laws, which limits their ability to advocate for themselves. There is a saying: knowledge is power. Understanding your legal protections is essential for navigating workplace challenges.

Creating Inclusive Workplaces

To break stigma, we must start with training and awareness. Educating staff about mental health reduces fear and promotes understanding. Mental health policies should be as standard as other workplace policies, clearly outlining support and accommodations.

Open communication and peer support foster safe environments. Workplaces don't need to treat the disorder medically, but they can provide a holistic, supportive culture that encourages collaboration between employers, employees, and clinicians.

Starting the conversation is key. Only then can workplaces become truly inclusive and supportive of employees living with bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder's impact on workplace functioning is variable and complex, shaped by symptom phases, job demands, stigma, and legal context. Health professionals must understand these dynamics to support affected individuals effectively. Creating informed, stigma-free, and accommodating work environments benefits not only employees with bipolar disorder but also organizations at large. Through education, advocacy, and collaboration, workplaces can evolve to recognize and embrace mental health diversity.

References available on request. MHM