

## Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

*For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.*

*These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.*

## Mood Disorders: Bipolar Disorder, Clinical Depression

### General Information

This tip sheet is designed to provide some general information about Mood Disorders such as Bipolar Disorder and Clinical Depression. Concepts outlined in this paper should not be used as strict definitions or rules applicable to all those effected, but merely as guidelines. Every person is different. Remember, participants themselves are your number one resource when trying to ensure the inclusiveness of your physical activity programs.

In the mental health field we practice the recovery model. Pg. 122 of the Framework for Mental Health reads, *"Recovery is a process in which people living with a mental illness are empowered and supported to be actively engaged in their own journey of wellbeing."* The recovery process builds on individual, family, cultural and community strengths and enables people to enjoy a meaningful life in their community while striving to achieve their full potential. Recovery doesn't mean "cure" although cure is possible for some people.

### Facts and Figures

Mood disorders may affect individuals of all ages. Depression is much more complex than simply calling it severe sadness. It can be very overwhelming and unlike normal sadness. It can be sadness for no apparent reason. An individual may clearly understand that their sadness is unrealistic but is powerless against it. Some people respond well to the treatments and medications available and may appear to be functioning quite normally on many days but may show signs and symptoms on other days. In some cases, the side-effects of the medications used to manage symptoms can cause unique problems.

A condition called Metabolic Syndrome may occur in which uncontrolled weight gain can happen regardless of healthy eating and lifestyle habits. Other side effects can be slurring of speech, uncontrolled movements such as twitches, and a peculiar foot-dragging shuffle. There are a whole range of other treatments such as counselling and lifestyle changes and stress management tools.

Some individuals may appear well but are secretly struggling and wish not to share their personal health status. You must respect their right to privacy should they choose not to disclose their condition or give current status.

### **What are Mood Disorders?**

The causes of mood disorders may vary greatly from one individual to another but the key feature is moods that do not match what one would expect in a given circumstance. Moods can change quickly and the illness may be episodic in nature. With depression, people may be very sad or may have a flat affect and show little or no emotion. They may have little sense of humor and an inability to focus. They may be easily frustrated or quick-tempered. With Bipolar Disorder, people may experience drastic mood swings with extremely high periods and extremely low periods. During low times, they may be severely depressed. At other times, they may be visibly agitated or appear as if “high”. During these times they may be very animated and impulsive.

### **Consequences of Mood Disorders**

People's ability to cope with the daily stressors of life may be greatly impaired by mood disorders:

- cognitive (problems with memory, concentration, organization, and comprehension);
- behavioural (depression, irritability, inability to sit still);
- lack of motivation, i.e. an inability to even get out of bed in the morning;
- lack of impulse control and poor decision-making;
- some individuals may also experience psychosis or delusions as a result of a mood disorder (See Tip Sheet on Psychosis).

### **Working with a person who has a Mood Disorder**

A person with a mood disorder may present with a combination of issues. People may have low self esteem and an inability to bounce back from disappointments. They may have difficulty maintaining a regular schedule and lack consistency. During times of abnormally high moods, they may overestimate their abilities and overdo it. During lows, they may lack motivation and experience fatigue with little exertion.

### **Understanding a Person with a Mood Disorder**

People with mood disorders may be irritable or sad for no apparent reason. They are usually very aware that their feelings are inappropriate for the situation but have no control over the feelings. Often they are told to “Snap out of it”, even though they have absolutely no ability to do so. Their emotions may be very close to the surface and they may burst into tears suddenly with little understanding of why they are crying. Pushing them to work harder is of little help and will simply drive them away for good. You must be understanding and supportive of them. Celebrate the small victories.

### **Tips for Getting Active - Overcoming Barriers**

Involve the person in physical activity goal setting - make sure goals are realistic. It may be helpful to provide some options for goals that they can choose from. Educate about the importance of physical activity to the individual and their family.

Know the individual's strengths and limitations - remember that these may vary from day to day. Be patient. Provide positive encouragement and support at all times. Listen to the person and encourage them to communicate their needs to you - they are the experts at what they need, not you!

### **Teaching and Communication Techniques**

The following are ideas for ensuring maximum participation for people with mood disorders, depending on their abilities. You can use these strategies in combination:

- Memory - write instructions down clearly and fully.
- Limited concentration - minimize distractions during the activity, and try to keep things consistent. Be willing to change things up more frequently to maximize attention. Provide frequent breaks and opportunity for rest.
- Physical limitations and fatigue - modify aspects of the activity to match with the person's physical abilities to promote success (i.e. lighter equipment, change size of activity area).
- Emotional - encourage success and mastery during physical activity in order to boost self-esteem, no matter what level (low or high) they may reach. It is important that they do not feel they have failed in any way.
- Social behaviour - use smaller groups, modeling a supportive approach and patience. Provide a structured environment, with frequent milestones as determined by the individual.

### **Physical Activity Tips and Modifications**

Mood disorders can be unpredictable and change frequently, so make sure you are always aware of the person's present strengths and weaknesses - concentrate on their abilities in order to promote success and confidence. Keep it simple - especially for people who have challenges with memory and concentration. For example, decrease the number of steps in an activity and limit distractions. Be aware of their limitations and shorten workouts if they are unable to recognize they are working too hard for their usual limitations.

### **Resources**

National Network for Mental Health - [www.nnmh.ca](http://www.nnmh.ca)

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