

A Family Guide To Understanding Bipolar Disorder In Persons With Mental Retardation And Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD)

Emotions are a form of intellectual function that are controlled by the brain. Emotional regulation requires sophisticated intellectual function just like language or complex motor skills. Persons with mental retardation may have problems with regulation of mood that are called “mood disorders”. Individuals can have three different kinds of mood problems: 1) too low, called depression, 2) too high, called mania, and 3) cycles between high and low, called bipolar disorder or manic depressive illness.

Mania means that a person’s mood is too high and that their brain is moving too fast. The term “mania” is different from the word “maniac” and persons with mania have too much energy, excessive happiness, diminished sleep, excessive sexual drive, and excessive speaking. Persons with moderate or severe mental retardation may demonstrate restlessness, moving too much, talking too much, not sleeping enough, or unusual sexual behaviors. Some patients become grumpy, angry, hostile, or assaultive. Mania can have many different symptoms depending on the kind of mental retardation. Most persons with mania may have episodes of depression at other times. A minority of patients with depression can sometimes exhibit manic symptoms. The symptoms of mania can be produced by medications, such as antidepressants, steroids, and others.

The treatment for mania or manic-depressive illness is the prescription of mood stabilizer medications. Medications that control mood include lithium, valproic acid, and others. Mania will often last for weeks or months and patients often require treatment for the symptoms.