

Hope for bipolar sufferers

Despite health care professionals describing bipolar disorder as a "debilitating illness" (Sunday Age, 14th May), it is important for Darren Clark to know that many people with bipolar disorder can get well, and stay well.

Health care professionals often associate bipolar disorder with substantial suffering. We hear a lot about the high rates of suicide, substance abuse, unemployment, criminal behaviour and divorce. We hear much less about those of us with bipolar disorder who stay well.

People with bipolar disorder are often just ordinary people living with a manageable illness. Bipolar disorder is not a character flaw, personality trait or sign of personal weakness. It is an illness that can affect all of us, regardless of age, race, social class and athletic ability.

By learning what works, and what does not work, people with bipolar disorder can learn to control the illness. Staying well often involves friendship, local community, laughter, dog walking, sun light, diet, medication, exercise and sleep. The challenge is to manage the illness so that symptoms of illness - depression, psychosis, mania, anxiety - do not interfere with our day-to-day life.

If health care professionals look outside the mental health system, they may discover that many of us with bipolar disorder are getting on with our lives. We are doctors, politicians, plumbers, lawyers, journalists and so on. Many of us are parents. Although we may take medication each day, not all of us endure substantial suffering, nor do we consider bipolar disorder to be a debilitating illness.

Dr Sarah Russell *The Sunday Age* 21st May, 2006