



# ENIGMA

## BIPOLAR NEWS AND VIEWS



[www.bipolarotago.balance.org.nz](http://www.bipolarotago.balance.org.nz)

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### Inside this issue

- St. John's Wort for depression
- Virus causes bipolar disorder?
- Writing for health
- Evening discussion group

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### St. John's Wort for depression?

Stories abound of the health benefits of St. John's Wort, a common garden plant and weed in New Zealand. Even nurses swear by its antidepressant effects. Are these just old husbands' tales or can we really throw away the prozac and find relief in our own garden?

A recent major review of the evidence for the efficacy of St. John's Wort as a treatment for major depression supports the use of the plant. The review, by the Cochrane Collaboration, was published in October this year. It looked at 29 trials involving 5489 people who had been diagnosed with major depression. The trials lasted between 4 and 12 weeks. The reviewers wanted to know whether extracts of hypericum (St. John's Wort) were:

- more effective than placebo
- as effective as standard antidepressant drugs
- had fewer adverse effects than standard antidepressant drugs

Overall St. John's Wort was found to treat depression better than placebo (sugar pills). However, as with much research of this kind, the most important effect is ignored. Whether a depressed person is treated with sugar pills, St. John's Wort, or any antidepressant pill, the majority of them get better. The mere fact of giving people some human attention seems to be a much ignored factor in uplifting depressed people.

*Continued on page 2*

## Evening Bipolar discussion groups

Our final discussion forum for the year was facilitated by Silke Hellwig, a nutritionist from Nutrition & Life Ltd, and Monique Wright from Sport Otago. They led a useful discussion on the interactions of diet, exercise and health.

*St. John's Wort continued.*

As an antidepressant St. John's Wort was found in these trials to be indistinguishable from tricyclic, tetracyclic or SSRI drugs. Strong evidence for its antidepressant power? Perhaps not when we consider the recent large studies showing that the SSRI's actually do not work as antidepressants.

On the question of adverse effects (a much more useful term than the usual euphemism "side effects") the reviewers found that many less people dropped out of trials due to unpleasant effects of St. John's Wort as compared to those taking the drugs. Incidentally, adverse effects occasionally reported with St. John's Wort include gastrointestinal symptoms, dizziness, confusion, tiredness, sedation and hair loss.

So don't rush out and throw away your prozac in favour of a St. John's Wort sandwich. Don't laugh! When I first started working in mental health there were several psychiatric nurses in Dunedin growing St. John's Wort at home and adding the leaves to their salads. They reported that it was extremely bitter but were enthusiastic about its mood lifting properties. Do talk to your doctor and ask her to justify the continued prescribing of antidepressant medication in light of the overall evidence that a) SSRI antidepressants don't work and b) St. John's Wort may be just as useful and have fewer harmful effects.

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Kiwipulse is an online social networking website for New Zealanders. They now have a bipolar support group. "This is a forum for you to share your thoughts, experiences and ideas with a group of others that suffer from Bipolar." Read more at: <http://www.kiwipulse.co.nz/groups/group/search?q=bipolar>

## Virus may cause bipolar disorder

Is bipolar disorder caused by a virus? For more than a hundred years people have wondered whether bipolar disorder and other mental disorders might be caused by some type of infection. Neurosyphilis was found to be caused by a bacterium but so far no infectious cause of any other "mental illness" has been identified. It is actually not a silly idea to think that bugs or viruses might have something to do with mental illness. Firstly, bipolar disorder often runs in families and so do many chronic infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and polio. Secondly, infections of the central nervous system by viruses often produce "psychiatric" symptoms in people. The spirochete bacterium of syphilis has already been mentioned and the resulting symptoms can look just like schizophrenia in some people. HIV, measles and mumps viruses have all been known to cause psychiatric distress. Even the common influenza has been known to precipitate mania in some people. A third reason for considering infectious cause of mental illness is that there is a tendency for people who develop bipolar disorder to have been born in winter or spring. This is a period of the year when there tends to be also a peak in infectious diseases. It seems reasonable to consider that infection of babies or the foetus may in some way contribute to development of mental illness later in life. Finally, a 2001 study of the drug amantadine, an anti-viral substance, showed that it also had some antidepressant effects.

Recent studies have put the spotlight on the borna virus as a possible cause of bipolar disorder, although the evidence is controversial and by no means conclusive. Borna virus infects many animals, but was originally found in horses.

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### *Borna virus continued.*

The animals can become depressed or over excited, symptoms which have been compared to bipolar disorder in humans. Antibodies specific to borna virus have now been found world wide in many people with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The levels of active virus in the blood also appear to rise when a person is having an acute mood disturbance. Many questions remain to be answered before borna can really be considered to cause bipolar disorder. It is not yet known how humans get or pass on this virus or where the source of the infection is. It is also not known whether borna virus can be passed to humans from the many other animals it infects.

If borna virus, or any other infection, is eventually found to cause bipolar disorder then we can perhaps hope for a revolution in treatment and prevention. Clean water, better sanitation, vaccines and antibiotics have transformed the lives of people during the twentieth century who would otherwise have been devastated by infections like typhoid, cholera, syphilis, smallpox, polio and tuberculosis. There was no such relief for people with bipolar disorder. In 1943, when penicillin was discovered to be an effective treatment for syphilis, psychiatrists around the world were treating our mania and depression with lobotomies, a crude brain operation which caused severe physical and psychological impairment. In 1970 Edgar Moniz received a Nobel Prize for the invention of this brutal procedure. Will the next few years bring a Nobel Prize for a simple anti-viral vaccine for bipolar disorder? Will the current psychiatric drug treatments eventually be considered as crude and disabling as lobotomies were?



## Writing for health

In the last two issues of Enigma we have featured quotes, words of wisdom sent in by readers who have found them useful in their own recovery. This month we would like to share an article from the university of Texas which shows that the act of writing in itself can be health giving. Read the whole article at <http://www.utexas.edu/features/2005/writing/>

“For nearly 20 years, Dr. James W. Pennebaker has been giving people an assignment: write down your deepest feelings about an emotional upheaval in your life for 15 or 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days. Many of those who followed his simple instructions have found their immune systems strengthened. Others have seen their grades improved. Sometimes entire lives have changed.

Pennebaker, a professor in the Department of Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin and author of several books, including “Opening Up” and “Writing to Heal,” is a pioneer in the study of using expressive writing as a route to healing. His research has shown that short-term focused writing can have a beneficial effect on everyone from those dealing with a terminal illness to victims of violent crime to college students facing first-year transitions.

“When people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experience improved health,” Pennebaker says. “They go to the doctor less. They have changes in immune function. If they are first-year college students, their grades tend to go up. People will tell us months afterward that it’s been a very beneficial experience for them.”

In his early research Pennebaker was interested in how people who have powerful secrets are more prone to a variety of health problems. If you could find a way for people to share those secrets, would their health problems improve?

It turned out that often they would, and that it wasn’t even necessary for people to tell their secrets to someone else. The act of simply writing about those secrets, even if they destroyed the writing immediately afterward, had a positive effect on health. Further studies showed that the benefits weren’t just for those who had dramatic secrets, but could also accrue to those who were dealing with divorces, job rejections or even a difficult commute to work.

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### **DISCLAIMER**

The opinions and articles expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily represent the views of the Otago Mental Health Support Trust or anyone associated with the organisation.

## MENSLINE

Mensline is a free and confidential telephone counselling service specifically for men and staffed by male only counsellors.

Monday to Friday 6.30pm to 10.30pm

0800 636 754

## Phobic phone line

This is a 24 hour a day, seven day a week free phone line staffed by volunteers. It is to help people who are experiencing panic attacks or OCD thoughts and need to talk to someone.

0800 142694389

### *Writing for health continued*

“Emotional upheavals touch every part of our lives,” Pennebaker explains. “You don’t just lose a job, you don’t just get divorced. These things affect all aspects of who we are—our financial situation, our relationships with others, our views of ourselves, our issues of life and death. Writing helps us focus and organize the experience.”

Our minds are designed to try to understand things that happen to us. When a traumatic event occurs or we undergo a major life transition, our minds have to work overtime to try to process the experience. Thoughts about the event may keep us awake at night, distract us at work and even make us less connected with other people.

When we translate an experience into language we essentially make the experience graspable. Individuals may see improvements in what is called “working memory,” essentially our ability to think about more than one thing at a time. They may also find they’re better able to sleep. Their social connections may improve, partly because they have a greater ability to focus on someone besides themselves.

If writing can have such a dramatic effect on our lives, does that mean that we would all be best off keeping a daily diary? Not necessarily, Pennebaker says. While his work is not inconsistent with diary keeping, it acts more as a kind of life course correction. It allows people to step back for a moment and evaluate their lives.

“I’m not convinced that having people write every day is a good idea,” Pennebaker says. “I’m not even convinced that people should write about a horrible event for more than a couple of weeks. You risk getting into a sort of navel gazing or cycle of self-pity.

“But standing back every now and then and evaluating where you are in life is really important.”

## *Enigma Quarterly*

**With the many demands on staff it is sometimes a struggle to get Enigma to the printer on time. We propose now to publish Enigma quarterly. This will mean we have time to report on bipolar and mental health topics in more depth while still retaining a local “flavour”. Your feedback on this and any other topics will be much appreciated.**

## *Telephone survey*

In early December we will be doing a telephone survey of 100 randomly selected *Enigma* recipients. This is to gauge the satisfaction of people who receive services from the Otago Mental Health Support trust. Thank you for your help.



Many thanks to these people for their support:



AAW Jones Charitable Trust, ACE Shacklock Charitable Trust, Balance, Dempsey Trust, The HealthCare Otago Charitable Trust, John Ilott Trust, Colortronics, University of Otago Marine Science and Nutrition departments.



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