6.4: Mood Stabilizers

Mood stabilizers are used primarily to treat bipolar disorder. They are also used to treat depression (usually in combination with an antidepressant), schizoaffective disorder, and disorders of impulse control. Lithium is an example of a mood stabilizer. Anticonvulsant medications are also used as mood stabilizers. Antipsychotics, antianxiety, and antidepressants may also be used to treat bipolar disorders.

Lithium

Lithium reduces excitatory neurotransmission (dopamine and glutamate) and increases inhibitory neurotransmission (GABA). It also alters sodium transport in nerve and muscle cells and causes a shift in metabolism of catecholamines. When administered to a client experiencing a manic episode, lithium may reduce symptoms within 1 to 3 weeks. It also possesses unique anti-suicidal properties that sets it apart from antidepressants. However, lithium toxicity can occur at doses close to therapeutic levels so lithium levels must be monitored regularly.

Read additional information about mechanism of action and adverse effects of medications used to treat bipolar disorder in the “Treatments for Bipolar Disorder” in the “Bipolar Disorders” chapter.

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