

What Is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also commonly known as manic depression, is a brain disorder that causes shifts in a person's mood, energy, and ability to function. The symptoms of bipolar disorder can result in damaged relationships, difficulty in working or going to school, and even suicide. There are generally periods of normal mood as well, but left untreated, people with bipolar disorder continue to experience these shifts in mood. The good news is that bipolar disorder can be treated, and people with this illness can lead full and productive lives.

What Are the Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder can cause dramatic mood swings—from high and feeling on top of the world, or uncomfortably irritable and 'revved up', to sad and hopeless, often with periods of normal moods in between. The periods of highs and lows are called episodes of mania and depression.

MANIC PHASE

- *Feeling on top of the world.* A sensation of sheer and utter happiness that nothing—not even bad news or a horrifying event or tragedy—can change.
- *Sudden or extreme irritability or rage.* While mania is often portrayed as a pleasurable experience, that is not the case for many people with bipolar disorder.
- *Grandiose delusions.* Individuals imagine that they have special connections with God, celebrities, or political leaders.
- *Invincibility or unrealistic beliefs in one's abilities.* The person feels that nothing can prevent him or her from accomplishing any task.
- *Hyperactivity.* Scheduling more events in a day than can be accomplished; inability to relax or sit still.
- *Excessively risky behavior.* Reckless driving, outlandish spending sprees, foolish business investments, or out-of-character sexual behavior.
- *Uncontrollable racing thoughts/rapid speech.* Ideas that abruptly change from topic to topic expressed in loud, rapid speech that becomes increasingly incoherent.
- *Less need for sleep.*

DEPRESSED PHASE

- *Intense sadness or despair.* The person feels helpless, hopeless, and worthless.
- *No interest in activities they once enjoyed.*
- *Loss of energy, fatigue.*
- *Sleep difficulties.* Either sleeping too much or not at all.
- *Changes in appetite.* Either a noticeable increase in appetite or a substantial weight loss unrelated to dieting.
- *Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions.*
- *Thoughts of death or suicide.*

Let's Talk Facts About Bipolar Disorder (Manic Depression)



Sometimes severe episodes of mania or depression include psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations (hearing or seeing things not actually there) and delusions (false, strongly held beliefs not influenced by logical reasoning).

What Causes the Illness?

Scientists are learning about the possible causes of bipolar disorder through several kinds of studies. Most now agree that there is no single cause for bipolar disorder—rather, many factors act together to produce the illness.

Bipolar disorder can run in families, so there is a high likelihood that genes contribute to the illness. In fact, 80%–90% of individuals with bipolar disorder have a relative with either depression or bipolar disorder, a rate that is seven to 10 times higher than that found in the general population. However, environmental factors are also important in bipolar disorder—extreme stress, sleep disruption, and drugs and alcohol may trigger episodes in vulnerable patients.

Can Bipolar Disorder Be Treated?

Absolutely. Bipolar disorder is very treatable. Because bipolar disorder is a recurrent illness, long-term preventive treatment is strongly recommended. Medication alone or a combination of psychotherapy and medication is optimal for managing the disorder over time. Medications known as “mood stabilizers” are usually prescribed to help control bipolar disorder.

In most cases, bipolar disorder is much better controlled if treatment is continuous. Even when there are no breaks in treatment, mood changes can still occur. Working closely with the psychiatrist and communicating openly can make a difference in the effectiveness of treatment.

Like all serious illnesses, bipolar disorder can disrupt a person's life and relationships with others, particularly with spouses and family members. Thus, people undergoing treatment for bipolar disorder sometimes benefit from psychotherapy, in which the individual and a psychiatrist work out the problems and re-establish relationships damaged by the illness.

Since bipolar disorder can cause serious disruptions and create an intensely stressful family situation, family members may also benefit from professional resources, particularly mental health advocacy groups. From these sources, families not only learn strategies to help them cope with their ill family member, but also learn to be an active part of the treatment.

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Resources

For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

1000 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)

730 N. Franklin Street
Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610-7224
800-826-3632
www.dbsalliance.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
703-524-7600
Information Helpline:
800-950-NAMI (6264)
www.nami.org

National Mental Health Association (NMHA)

2001 N. Beauregard Street
12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
800-969-NMHA (6642)
www.nmha.org

One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigmas associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.