



UNDERSTANDING BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder (also known as Manic-Depression) causes extremes in a person's mood and behavior. This disorder is marked by alternating episodes of depression and mania (extreme elation). These mood changes are not the normal emotional shifts connected to life events. You may feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster—one moment you're feeling great, and then later you feel really low. You may go from high energy to low energy. You may think you are losing your mind.

Bipolar disorder affects about 3 out of every 100 adults, and about 1 out of every 100 children, in the United States. The disorder often develops in the late teenage years; at last half of all cases start before age 25. Men and women are equally affected, and it is found across all cultures and ethnic groups.

Scientists think bipolar disorder is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain, although there are no tests to check for such an imbalance. There may be a genetic component. Bipolar disorder is difficult to diagnose, in fact, it sometimes looks like depression. What makes it different from depression is that the person with bipolar disorder sometimes feels the "high" of the manic phase. Some people experience symptoms for years before they are properly diagnosed. Like other medical diagnoses, bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be managed carefully over the lifespan.

Symptoms differ among individuals. There are symptoms of depression, and symptoms of mania or hypomania (a lower level of mania). Some of these symptoms include:

Depression

- Dramatic change in sleep patterns (sleeping a lot or unable to sleep)
- Significant change in eating patterns or change in body size
- Lack of interest in activities that you used to enjoy (including sex)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling very sluggish or restless—so much so that other people notice
- Feeling worthless or excessively guilty about something
- Fatigue or low energy level almost every day
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling irritable or having a "hair-trigger" temper
- A sense that life is not worth living, or thoughts of suicide (if this is the case, seek help *immediately*)

Mania

- Feeling unusually high or joyful, increased energy
- Decreased need for sleep
- High self-esteem, feeling self-important, feeling unstoppable
- Fast speech or racing thoughts
- Easily distracted, difficulty concentrating
- Feeling paranoid or having delusions
- Impaired judgment
- Behavior that is aggressive, intolerant, or intrusive
- Engaging in risky behavior (such as spending sprees, impulsive sex)
- Substance abuse

WHAT CAN I DO IF I EXPERIENCE SEVERE MOOD SWINGS?

If you have been experiencing symptoms for longer than two weeks, and the symptoms are affecting your daily life, call your doctor and make an appointment. Your doctor will give you a check up to rule out any other illnesses that might be causing your mood changes.

If it is determined that you do have bipolar disorder, you will most likely given medication, such as a mood stabilizer, which may be combined with an antidepressant. Psychotherapy (combined with medication) can be helpful with this disorder. In therapy you can learn strategies to manage stresses that trigger episodes, recognize early symptoms before they become extreme, and how to appropriately express emotions in relationships. Support groups can help with feelings of isolation and provide learning experiences from other members.

Many people with bipolar disorder will respond well to continuous treatment, and live full and satisfying lives. However, even with proper treatment, mood changes can occur. Here are some ways to help yourself minimize the mood changes:

- Keep all your appointments (even if you don't feel like it)
- Take your medication as prescribed
- Keep track of your mood changes and symptoms and share the information with your doctor
- Get enough sleep, and sleep on a regular schedule
- Take a walk or get some exercise daily
- Eat healthy foods, and eat on a regular schedule
- Do not use alcohol or other drugs
- Try to reduce your stress; don't commit to too many activities
- Limit your intake of caffeine
- Limit long-distance travel



You may think you should be able to manage your mood swings on your own. You may feel ashamed of seeking mental health treatment. Bipolar disorder is an illness that can be treated with medication much like diabetes or other medical conditions. There is no need to suffer through depression. Explore different treatment options. Make lifestyle changes. Seek professional help. When you put off getting help, you put your future at risk. Untreated bipolar disorder can lead to broken relationships, substance abuse, job loss, and suicide. Getting help is the healthy thing to do.

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Sources

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