

Bipolar Disorder



Do you have questions about bipolar disorder? This handout can give you the answers you need to understand this illness and how it's treated.

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a biological disorder. This chronic (lifelong) illness causes unusual shifts in your mood, energy, and ability to function.

When you have bipolar disorder, your mood shifts are severe—quite different from normal, everyday ups and downs. Untreated, they can hurt your relationships and your performance at work or school. They cause poor decisions and distort your very sense of self. Not surprisingly, people with untreated bipolar disorder are at risk for suicide.

But there is good news. Bipolar disorder is highly treatable. With good medical help for your illness, you can lead a full and productive life.

Bipolar disorder is...

...more common than you might think. This illness affects more than 2 million Americans, both children and adults. This number will go up as more people are correctly diagnosed.

...chronic and serious. Bipolar disorder won't go away. And without treatment, it won't get better. Untreated, it can cause serious difficulties in every area of life.

...a treatable illness. With good medical help, people with bipolar disorder can manage their disease and enjoy more balanced, healthy lives.

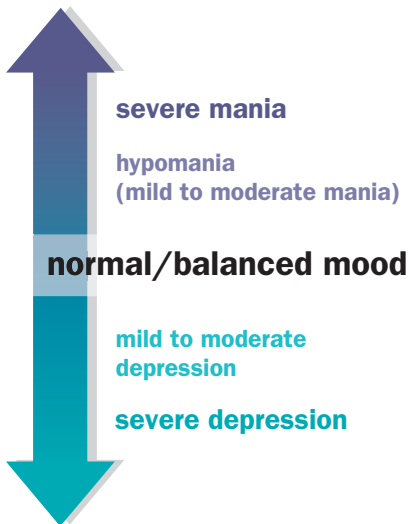
INSIDE :

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?	2
What causes bipolar disorder?	3
How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?	3
How is bipolar disorder treated?	4
Where can I learn more?	4
Self-management action plan	4

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

With bipolar disorder, you swing from one emotional extreme to another. And as your mood changes, so does your energy level and behavior.

At times, you're overly "high" or irritable. Later, you're plunged into a "low" of terrible sadness and hopelessness. These periods of highs and lows are called **episodes** of mania and depression.



▲ In between extremes, you may have normal moods, or milder forms of mania or depression. So it might be helpful to think of bipolar's various states as points along a scale. Keep in mind, however, that some people with bipolar have mixed episodes. A **mixed episode** is when you have symptoms of mania and depression at the same time—or when mania and depression alternate frequently throughout the day.

People with bipolar disorder have experienced some of these symptoms of mania and depression.

Symptoms of mania (a manic episode)	Symptoms of depression (a depressive episode)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Feeling on top of the world. You feel sheer and utter happiness. Not even bad news or events can bring you down.■ Grandiose delusions. You imagine that you have a special tie to God or certain famous people.■ Invincibility. You feel like there's nothing you can't do.■ Hyperactivity. You're full of energy. You over-schedule your days. You can't relax or sit still.■ Risky behavior. You drive recklessly or go on wild spending sprees. You make foolish business investments. Your sexual behavior is out-of-character.■ Uncontrollable racing thoughts/rapid speech. You talk loudly and quickly. You jump from topic to topic. Your speech becomes increasingly difficult to understand.■ Less need for sleep. You sleep far less than usual, but you aren't tired.■ Sudden irritability or rage. You can easily become enraged—particularly when your plans are thwarted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Intense sadness or despair. You feel helpless, hopeless, and worthless.■ No interest in activities once enjoyed. Your favorite things hold little interest and don't cheer you up.■ Loss of energy. You're tired and weary. It's hard to force yourself to do anything. You move slowly.■ Sleep difficulties. You sleep all the time—or not at all.■ Changes in appetite. You're more or less hungry than usual. You lose or gain a lot of weight—without dieting.■ Difficulty concentrating. Your mind wanders. You have trouble remembering things, or making decisions.■ Constant thoughts of death or suicide. You don't see the point of living. You wonder if you should end everything.



What causes bipolar disorder?

Most scientists now agree that there is no single cause for bipolar disorder. Rather, several factors may act together to produce it.

Genetics are almost certainly involved. Why do we think so? Bipolar disorder runs in families. In fact, 80-90% of people with this illness have a relative with depression or bipolar disorder.

But genetics aren't the only cause. If they were, identical twins would always develop the disorder together—and research shows that they don't. Most likely, the disorder is “triggered” in a person who already has a genetic tendency toward it. Possible triggers include physical conditions (like hormone problems) or life events.

CO-EXISTING CONDITIONS

People with bipolar disorder may often have other health problems as well. Here are those that often occur with bipolar disorder:

- Anxiety disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Thyroid problems

If you have one of these problems, you'll need to treat it as well.

How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

Doctors use several different tools to learn about your condition and make a diagnosis:

- **Questionnaires.** Your doctor may use questionnaires (forms) to check for bipolar disorder and other mental health problems. The questionnaires ask about your symptoms at different times. They may also ask about stress, your coping style, and the support you have in your life.
- **Medical history.** Your doctor asks about your past and present illnesses and your family history.
- **Physical exam.** An exam helps your doctor know if your symptoms come from something other than bipolar disorder.
- **Diagnostic criteria.** To make a diagnosis, your doctor compares your information to the standard medical definition for bipolar disorder.



Self-management action plan

Many people have overcome the challenge of bipolar disorder—but not without help. Here are some tips to help make sure you get the support and structure you need:

- **Find the right doctor.** Your family doctor should stay involved in your care. You also need to work with a specialist in treating your bipolar disorder. Ask for a list of psychiatrists, and shop around until you find someone you “click” with.
- **Involve your family and other loved ones.** Early on in your treatment, help your family and other loved ones understand your illness. (Start with the resources listed at www.ihc.com/mentalhealth.) You may want to have joint meetings with your psychiatrist or therapist to make sure your family knows what to expect from treatment—and how they can help. There may be times when they need to intervene to make sure you’re safe.
- **Develop your treatment plan.** Mental health care isn’t “one size fits all.” With your doctors and loved ones, decide on a treatment plan that fits your unique situation. Make sure it includes what to do in case you’re unable to help yourself or follow your treatment on your own.
- **Set goals for healthy living in ALL areas.** Finding balance in life will help you manage your illness. Set goals to get there:
 - **Relationships.** Don’t shut out family and friends! Example goals: Phone a friend every day. Attend scheduled social events. Volunteer.

My goal: _____
 - **Nutrition, exercise, and sleep.** Mind and body go hand in hand. Example goals: Drink 8 glasses of water each day. Eat 5-10 fruits and vegetables daily. Walk every day. Sleep 8 hours every night.

My goal: _____
 - **Recreation and renewal.** Commit to having fun and soothing your spirit. Example goals: Do your hobby. Listen to music. Attend religious or cultural events. Write in a journal. Meditate.

My goal: _____
- **Stick to your treatment.** Take any medication as directed. Keep your appointments. Talk to your doctor if you don’t see good results—you can always adjust your plan. Remember that you deserve relief, and have a great chance to get it.
- **Celebrate your successes.** Reward yourself for meeting “healthy living” goals. Celebrate the milestones in your treatment. Did you sleep well through the night? Go a month without a high or low episode? Congratulate yourself! Your hard work is paying off.

How is bipolar disorder treated?

- **Medication.** The main treatment for bipolar disorder is medication. Your doctor will probably recommend that you take a mood stabilizer (such as lithium) every day. A mood stabilizer can help prevent wild mood swings. Also, from time to time you may need to take other medications to treat episodes of mania or depression that break through despite the mood stabilizer.
- **Counseling.** Also called **psychotherapy** or “**talk therapy**,” counseling can help you—and your loved ones—work out some of the problems caused by your illness. Support groups and advocacy groups can help, too.

As you and your doctor begin to plan your treatment, keep in mind that it may take some time to find a good plan for you. Don’t give up. You have many options for treatment. If your illness isn’t controlled, you and your health care providers can try a new approach.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Visit IHC’s Mental Health Online Center:

www.ihc.com/mentalhealth. You’ll find materials on bipolar and other common mental health disorders. You’ll also find links to other trusted sources for information, support, and advice for people with bipolar disorder.



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