

What is Bipolar disorder?¹

We all experience minor changes in our mood from one day to the next or from one week to the next. Sometimes we may feel happy and sometimes we may feel sad. There is usually a good reason for these changes in mood. Perhaps we are happy because we have just had a nice meal with a close friend; or maybe we are sad because we have lost something or someone that was very important to us.

Generally, our mood is appropriate for what is happening in our lives at the time. However, people who have bipolar disorder tend to have major changes in mood for no obvious reason. He/she may be extremely excited and happy when there is no reason to be. At other times, he/she may feel very upset or sad even though a lot of good things are happening in his/her life. When a person has repeated mood swings which are very severe and which do not seem to occur for any good reason, it is likely that the person has a bipolar disorder.

The mood changes involved in bipolar disorder range from one extreme to another. At one extreme, the person might feel excessively happy and excited with a huge increase in energy and activity. This extreme mood swing is called 'mania'. At the other extreme, the person might be severely depressed with a great loss of interest or energy. These mood swings usually last anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.

Frequency of illness

A person who has bipolar disorder does not always feel manic or depressed. Each episode of mania or depression lasts for a while and then stops. The person usually then feels completely well again.

The length of time that a person remains well between episodes of illness varies from one person to the next. Some people may have only two or three episodes of illness in their entire lives. Other people may have four or more episodes of illness per year (referred to as 'rapid cycling'). The good news, however, is that with regular medication you can reduce or even prevent further episodes of illness.

Severity of the illness

Although everyone feels very happy at times and quite sad at other times, it is usually possible to keep up our normal tasks. However, in bipolar disorder these

¹ Adapted from Health Public Affairs, Department of Health, NSW. *Living with Mood Swings — Manic Depressive Illness*. State Health Publication no (HP) 86-027; and Falloon IR, Hole V. *How is a Manic Episode Treated?* Buckingham Mental Health Service, 1990, quoted in Andrews G, Jenkins R, eds. *Managing Mental Disorders (UK Edition)*. Sydney: World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, 1999. Distributed for the publishers in the UK by IN 2 Mail Ltd, Fax: +44 (0)1252 322315; PO Box 55, Aldershot, Hampshire GU12 4FP.

mood swings may be so severe that they interfere with normal activities and everyday living. Behaviours may change completely and may disrupt the person's work or relationships.

The severity of illness differs from one person to another. Some people may have frequent and severe episodes of mania and depression. Other people may only rarely become unwell. Moreover, for each person the severity of illness differs from one episode of illness to another. Some episodes can be so severe that the person needs to spend time in hospital; however, other episodes could be very mild and not need hospital care. If you think you are becoming unwell again, seek medical attention immediately. With early treatment, the episode of illness is likely to be less severe and hospital admission might be avoided.

How common is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is quite a common illness. About one person in 100 will develop this disorder at some time in their lives. The disorder usually starts before the age of 30 but may occur at any time in the life span. Women and men are equally affected.

There is some suggestion that many of the people who develop this disorder have an IQ that is higher than average. Certainly, there are many successful people with bipolar disorder. These people include the American statesman Abraham Lincoln, the painter Vincent Van Gogh, writer Virginia Woolf, and actresses Vivien Leigh and Frances Farmer. These people all led productive and creative lives.

What causes bipolar disorder?

No one knows exactly what causes bipolar disorder. However, most people now believe that this disorder is caused by a number of factors (see below).

Heredity

We know that this disorder can be inherited and runs in families. These findings suggest that there is likely to be some kind of faulty gene in the body. If someone in the family has bipolar disorder, other family members are more likely to develop this disorder than people who do not have a relative with bipolar disorder. However, just because one member of the family has this disorder, it does not mean that all family members will develop this disorder. Other risk factors may add to the likelihood of developing this disorder.

Chemical disturbance

People with this disorder seem to have a disturbance of the chemicals in the brain. It is likely that the faulty gene causes the body to produce the wrong balance of chemicals.

Personality factors

It seems probable that personality factors may influence the onset of this disorder. Many people who have probably inherited the faulty gene from their parents do not go on to develop bipolar disorder. It is possible that among people who carry this gene, those who tend to have a moody personality and who do not handle stress very well may be more at risk of developing the disorder.

Stress

Stressful life events (such as the loss of a loved one or childbirth) may increase the chance of developing bipolar disorder among those who are at risk. Stressful events such as these may also make further phases of mania and depression more likely among those who already have this disorder. Stress alone, however, does not seem to be enough to cause the disorder among people who have no other risk factors.

Medication for bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder involves a disturbance of the chemicals in the brain, which can be treated with medication. Ask your doctor for information about the medication used to treat bipolar disorder.

Coping with mood swings

Although medication is very useful for managing mood swings, a lot of people have found that sensible life changes can also help. Some useful tips are listed below:

Learn to recognize the onset of mania or depression

Very few people go high or low overnight. If a mood swing is developing, you will usually have time to notice it. The signs of depression and mild mania are widely known. The important thing is to find out what *your* warning signals are. You can then seek medical help straight away — quick action can often stop the illness from becoming too severe. The key thing is to **catch the mood swing early. The longer you leave it, the harder it will be to control.**

Recognizing depression

Think back to the last time you were depressed. You probably experienced a number of these feelings:

- tiredness
- poor concentration
- low self image
- social withdrawal
- suicidal thoughts
- loss of interest in sex
- loss of self confidence
- changes of appetite
- feeling sad or guilty
- waking early feeling anxious
- lack of interest in things you used to enjoy.

My signs of beginning to feel depressed are:

Recognizing mania

The signs of hypomania (mild mania) are quite different. Here are some common signs:

- feeling unusually excited, happy and optimistic OR feeling cranky and irritable if others don't share your enthusiasm and ideas
- sleeping poorly and waking early
- poor concentration and short attention span
- rapid, pressurized speech
- poor judgement (eg overspending; reckless behaviour such as dangerous driving)
- self centredness — being rude or insensitive to other people
- increased interest in sex, with sexual behaviour that is unusual for you
- grandiose ideas.

My signs of beginning to get high are:

Coping with depression

Ask your doctor for the leaflet *Coping with depression*. There are a wide variety of methods and not all work for everybody. You need to find out which ones work best for you.

Coping with a high

Reduce stimulation

If you suspect you are becoming unwell again, it will be useful to reduce excess stimulation. By doing your best to remain calm and relaxed, you might be able to reduce the severity of the manic phase. The following tips may be useful:

- Seek a quiet and restful place to spend your time. This place may be a room in your house, your garden or a park.
- Avoid crowds, busy streets, shops and parties.
- Avoid games and group activities.
- Avoid making important decisions about your life while you are unwell.
- Spend time with a friend who is calm and relaxed.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Ask your friends to try and stay calm when you are unwell. It will help if they try to ignore silly jokes or comments you may make, or inappropriate behaviour. Keep things low key, non-competitive and relaxing. Friends can try to slow you down by example rather than by demand (eg they can speak slowly, walk slowly and engage in calm activities).
- Avoid arguments wherever possible.
- Household members can set clear limits for your behaviour. They can show firm, calm disapproval for inappropriate behaviour (eg spending money, sexual harassment or comments, aggressive or irritable behaviour, being a 'show-off'). It also helps if they avoid laughing about your behaviours, or joining in with your excitement.
- Spend nights in your bedroom, even if you are not sleeping. Lie down and relax as best you can. (Your health worker can teach you some relaxation techniques.) Do not play music or the radio at this time. A simple repetitive task may also be useful at night time (eg a solo card game such as Patience).

- Avoid drinking tea, coffee, cola or other drinks that contain caffeine (which is a stimulant).
- Avoid alcohol or any drugs other than those prescribed by your doctor.

Exercise regularly

Regular exercise can help you cope with stress. If you are fit, your anxiety level and blood pressure will stay lower when you are under stress. Thirty minutes of fast walking three to four times per week is good exercise. Swimming is also very good for keeping fit.

Learn to relax

Take regular time out to walk, look at the trees and birds, take a hot bath, or go for a swim. If work makes you tense, stop off at the park on the way home, play with your dog, or do an activity you enjoy like gardening or painting. Take time to unwind and be kind to yourself.

Another way to reduce tension and stress is through progressive muscle relaxation. This technique allows you to control your breathing rate while you slowly relax all the muscles in the body. You will be surprised at how much tension and stress you carry around in your body every day. By relaxing your body and your mind (daily and when needed) you handle everyday stress more easily. Ask your health worker for a leaflet on progressive muscle relaxation.

Use structured problem-solving techniques to reduce stress

By increasing your ability to solve everyday problems (large and small) you will lower your stress levels. The first step in structured problem-solving is to *define* a specific problem that is worrying you. In the next stage you think about all possible ways of solving this problem. After weighing up the pros and cons of each possible solution, decide which solution is the best one. Having made this decision, write down *exactly* how you will put this solution into action. Finally, come back and review how well the solution worked. You may need to try another solution if the one you chose did not work. Ask your health worker for a leaflet about the structured problem-solving technique.

Increase useful activities

It is important that family members do not try to stop all your activities. If you are stopped from being active during a manic phase you are likely to become frustrated, irritated, and even violent. You will usually benefit more from spending your time doing useful and relaxing activities. These activities will need to be carefully planned and clearly defined:

- Arrange a list of activities for each day. Choose simple activities that do not need much concentration. Avoid tedious, lengthy, or possibly frustrating activities. Good activities include such things as gardening, handy work, cleaning, mopping floors or vacuuming, drawing or painting, writing letters to friends, or watching films.
- Go for a walk. Plan to walk in a peaceful area. Take a calm and relaxed friend with you. Do not take the dog — an added distraction.

See the humour in life

Try not to take yourself too seriously. Even the most embarrassing or stressful moments often have a funny side when you think about them later. If you feel low or sad do something that you enjoy. If you feel excited and high, remember that you do not have to save the world today! Relax for a while.

Summary

- People with bipolar disorder tend to have major changes in mood for no obvious reason.
- People are usually completely well between their phases of mania and depression.
- This disorder can be controlled with medication.
- Mood swings may be so severe that they disrupt work and relationships.
- With early treatment the episode of illness is likely to be less severe and hospital admission may be avoided.
- The mood swings in bipolar disorder involve phases of mania and phases of depression.
- Bipolar disorder is caused by a number of factors including heredity, brain chemicals, personality factors, and stress.
- Medication can help you control your mood swings.
- Simple changes in lifestyle can also be helpful.