

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar Disorder describes a category of disorders that all involve abnormal mood swings. 'Bipolar' refers to the two 'poles' of mood: a high, elevated mood (mania or, if milder, hypomania) and a low depressed mood. Its most severe form used to be called 'manic depression' for this reason. Today, it's recognised that there are many types of bipolar conditions, with different balances between the two extremes. Around 2% of the population is affected by Bipolar Disorder.

Causes of Bipolar Disorder

We don't yet know exactly what causes Bipolar Disorder. There's no single cause – instead, many biological and environmental factors appear to act together to trigger its onset. Because it frequently runs in families, there does seem to be genetic basis – however, just because one family member has the illness, it is not necessarily the case that other family members will develop it. Its onset is often triggered by a stressful life event. Many individuals often have their first symptoms in late adolescence, but, due to the episodic nature of the illness, aren't diagnosed until much later in life.

Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

The highs: People having an episode of mania or hypomania can:

- Feel happy and energetic; need little sleep
- Be filled with creative ideas
- Think or speak quickly, jumping between ideas
- Impulsively spend or travel
- Feel invincible, and start on grand schemes
- Feel they're having a 'mystical' experience
- Have trouble concentrating and be easily distracted
- Be irritated when others don't support their ideas
- Abuse alcohol and drugs, particularly cocaine and sleeping medications
- Act aggressively to provoke or be intrusive towards other people

*The most extreme expressions of mania can also involve delusions and hallucinations.

The lows: The depressive phase can be mild or severe. Sufferers can experience some or all of these symptoms:

- Feeling sad, anxious or angry for a long time
- Hating themselves
- Having a lack of feeling about anything
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Changes in normal patterns of sleeping or eating
- Loss of interest or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities, including sex
- Chronic pain, with or without a known cause
- Suicidal thoughts

Frequency and duration of mood swings

Aside from the high and low moods themselves, the key to diagnosing bipolar disorder is noticing how frequently and severely these moods re-occur and, when they do, how long each episode lasts.

Only some sufferers swing directly from mania to depression and back again. Most have long periods of normal moods when they feel symptom-free. On average, the gap between episodes ranges from 18 months to three years. Episodes of mania or hypomania can last a few hours, a few days or a few weeks. The depressive phase is generally longer, and can run for months.



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Types of Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar Type I Disorder is the more severe of the two. Individuals typically experience mania with longer 'highs', may have psychotic episodes and are more likely to be hospitalised for safety.

Bipolar Type II Disorder is milder. Individuals experience only hypomania rather than full-blown mania, with no psychotic episodes. They have also had at least one major depressive episode.

Treatment and management

The most effective treatments for Bipolar Disorder combine medication with some form of psychological therapy. Most people with Bipolar Disorder – even those with severe forms – can use both of these to effectively control their mood swings and live full and satisfying lives.

Medication: Because of its biological roots, preventative medication can significantly prevent or limit the symptoms of the illness. Lithium, and other mood stabilisers such as Epilim, Tegretol, Lamictal and Zyprexa are commonly prescribed for long-term use.

Psychological therapies: Studies have shown that medication in combination with psychosocial treatments can lead to much better outcomes for bipolar individuals than just medication alone.

At South Pacific Private we use a combination of effective therapies, including:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy
- Psycho-education
- Family therapy
- Interpersonal / social rhythm therapy

Key things to remember

- Bipolar Disorder is an illness involving abnormal mood swings, usually with alternating periods of depression and mania or hypomania
- The pattern of mood swings varies from individual to individual
- 'High' episodes can range from mild feelings of increased energy to severe psychosis requiring hospitalisation. 'Low' episodes are generally more frequent and longer lasting than high episodes
- For people under the age of forty, some symptoms of Bipolar Disorder may include sleeping a lot more than usual, and feeling agitated, restless or incredibly frustrated
- The best treatments take into account the whole person, rather than focusing only on the current symptoms an individual is struggling with

For treatment options, other resources, or a complimentary assessment

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