

Bipolar Disorder: Symptoms and Treatment

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that effects over 5.7 million Americans (National Institute of Mental Health). Bipolar disorder causes intense mood swings, ranging from emotional highs to emotional lows. The mood swings tend to be episodic that vary in frequency and length depending on the person. The mood swings often affect sleep, activity, behavior and the ability to do day-to-day tasks.

The emotional highs are referred to as mania or hypomania. During a manic episode, people feel energized, wired and like their mind is racing. Their activity level is high and they think they can do a lot of things at once. They can be agitated and have trouble sleeping. A person experiencing a manic episode is more likely to engage in risky behavior like unsafe sex. Mania may also trigger psychosis, like hallucinations, and require medical treatment or hospitalization. A person experiencing hypomania has very similar symptoms as mania, but the symptoms are often less severe and does not require hospitalization. Children and teens experiencing a manic episode have very similar symptoms, but may also act unusually silly, talk fast and have a short temper.

The emotional lows are referred to as major depressive episodes. A person experiencing a major depressive episode feels depressed, sad, empty or hopeless. They have little energy and are often uninterested in activities they typically enjoy. Insomnia or sleeping too much and eating too much or too little is common. During a depressive episode, it can be difficult to concentrate and engage in day-to-day activities. Suicidal ideation or suicide attempts can also occur. Children may also complain of headaches and stomachaches.

There are four different types of bipolar disorder.

Bipolar I: manic episodes that last for 7 days or longer or the manic episodes require hospital care. The depressive episodes last for at least two weeks.

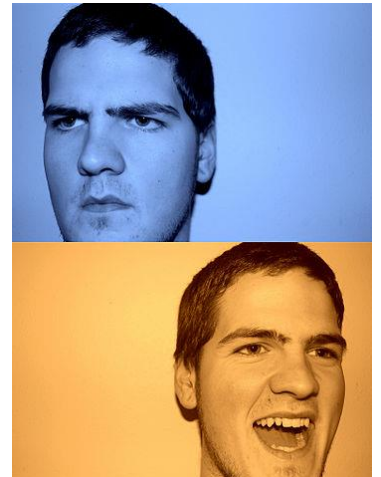
Bipolar II: A person with Bipolar II experiences depressive episodes and hypomanic episodes, but does not have manic episodes.

Cyclothymic Disorder: A person with Cyclothymic Disorder has numerous depressive and hypomanic symptoms over a 2 year period for adults or 1 year period for a child. However, they do not meet the diagnostic criteria for hypomanic or depressive episodes.

Unspecified Bipolar Disorder: A person has some symptoms of bipolar disorder, but they do not meet the diagnostic criteria for Bipolar I, II or Cyclothymic Disorder.

Diagnosis

Bipolar disorder can be difficult to diagnose. A person with bipolar disorder is more likely to seek help during a depressive episode, which can cause them to be misdiagnosed with major depression. It can also be challenging to diagnose children and teens as they experience extreme mood swings during adolescence. A doctor or mental health practitioner can help rule out other conditions and help determine if your child's behavior is normal adolescent behavior or symptomatic of bipolar disorder. At



this time there are no blood tests or brain scans that help diagnosis bipolar disorder. Doctors will instead rely on behavior tracking and self-reporting to determine patterns.

Bipolar disorder can start in childhood or as late as ages 40-50. The average onset is age 25. Children of parents with bipolar disorder are at a greater risk of having bipolar disorder than the general population. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, if both parents have bipolar disorder, the risk increases 50-75%.

Treatment

Bipolar disorder is often treated with medication. Medications affect people differently, so medications need to be monitored closely. Due to the complexity of the disorder, it often takes multiple medications to manage the symptoms. It may take quite a bit of trial and error before the right combination of medications is determined. For children, doctors often begin with low doses.

Therapy is also beneficial to help people with bipolar disorder understand and manage their symptoms. Therapy can also help people build relationships with their family and friends that can be harmed as a result of bipolar disorder.

What Can Parents Do?

- **Pay attention to signs and symptoms.** If you believe your child may have bipolar disorder contact your doctor.
- **Listen to your child and encourage them to talk about their feelings.**
- **Be patient and understanding of their symptoms.**
- **Watch for any signs of suicidal ideation.** Consult your doctor immediately if you notice signs of suicidal ideation.
- **Notify the doctor if you notice harmful side effects from the medications.**
- **Help your child understand their treatment plan so they can learn to manage their symptoms.** One way you can do this is to create a chart to track behaviors and moods.

Resources:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/bipolar-disorder-in-children-and-teens/index.shtml>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bipolar-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355955>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/bipolar-disorder/index.shtml>