

Understanding Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a major psychiatric illness, also known as *manic-depressive disorder*. People with this illness sometimes experience extremely high moods (*mania*) and sometimes extremely low moods (*depression*). Symptoms of mania and depression usually occur at different times, but they may exist together in what is called a *mixed episode*. A person may also have normal moods.

The cause of bipolar disorder is unknown. Scientists believe the disorder may be caused by an imbalance in brain chemicals, particularly the chemical *norepinephrine*. This imbalance may be due to genetic factors. About 1% of people develop bipolar disorder in their lifetime.

Bipolar disorder usually develops between the ages of 16 and 35, but may develop in a person's 40s or even 50s. Bipolar disorder is a lifelong disorder, but between mood episodes many people can function well. Many famous people have had bipolar disorder and contributed greatly to society, such as the artist Vincent Van Gogh, the writer Edgar Allen Poe, and the actress Patty Duke.

Bipolar disorder is diagnosed with a clinical interview. The interviewer checks to see whether the person has experienced specific symptoms for a period of at least 2 weeks. The clinician must also make sure that the person has no physical problems that could cause symptoms like those of bipolar disorder, such as thyroid gland disease.

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SYMPTOMS OF MANIA

The symptoms of mania involve a change in mood states (usually irritability or euphoria), increased self-esteem and confidence, and increased goal-directed activity (for example, the person spends an excessive amount of time and energy on work, school, or other activities). Some of these symptoms will affect how people perform their daily activities. A person does not have to have all of the following symptoms to be diagnosed with mania.

Common symptoms of mania include the following:

- Euphoria
- Irritability
- Reduced need for sleep

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- Increased talkativeness
- Inflated self-esteem
- Grandiosity
- Increased goal-directed activity
- Racing thoughts
- Distractibility

The term *hypomanic symptoms* refers to manic symptoms that are less severe and less disruptive.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

Depressive symptoms are the opposite of manic symptoms, with low mood and inactivity as the major features. A person does not need to have all of the following symptoms to be diagnosed with depression.

Common symptoms of depression include the following:

- Depressed mood or sadness
- Decreased interest or pleasure
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, or helpless
- Guilt
- Suicidality
- Change in appetite and/or weight
- Sleep disturbances
- Lethargy or agitation
- Fatigue
- Problems with attention, concentration, and making decisions

Common symptoms of bipolar disorder include:

- Mania (euphoria, irritability, etc.)
- Depression (low mood, etc.)

FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED SYMPTOMS

Some people with bipolar disorder may experience other psychiatric symptoms when they have a manic or depressive episode, although these symptoms are not among those used to diagnose the disorder. Such symptoms include *hallucinations* (hearing, seeing, feeling, or smelling things that aren't there) and *delusions* (unusual beliefs that other people don't have—for example, paranoia or fear of being persecuted).

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SIMILAR PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

Bipolar disorder shares some symptoms with other major psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder. There are differences between bipolar disorder and these other disorders, however. The primary difference is that when a person with bipolar disorder has a stable mood, he or she usually does not experience hallucinations or delusions, while a person with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder may have these symptoms even during periods when his or her mood is stable. People with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or personality disorders also experience intense mood shifts. The mood shifts in bipolar disorder typically last for weeks to months, while mood shifts among people with PTSD or personality disorder may last only minutes or hours.

The symptoms of bipolar disorder overlap with those of other psychiatric disorders.

TREATMENT

Medications are used to treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder. Lithium, carbamazepine, and valproic acid are effective medications. Antipsychotic medications like olanzapine can also treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder. Antidepressant medications are sometimes used to treat depression in bipolar disorder, but they may increase the frequency of hypomanic or manic episodes.

Many people with bipolar disorder also use supportive counseling and family treatment to help them cope with the disruptive aspects of the disorder.

Bipolar disorder is treated with medication, as well as other services (such as counseling and family treatment).

FURTHER READING

- Gopeland, M. E. (1994). *Living without Depression and Manic Depression: A Workbook for Maintaining Mood Stability*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
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- Miklowitz, D. (2002). *The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide: What You and Your Family Need to Know*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Mondimore, F. M. (1999). *Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients and Families*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.