



Most people who develop bipolar disorder will have experienced some symptoms by the age of 25.

Bipolar Disorder



It's normal to experience a range of emotions and feelings in our lives. They can be influenced by things going on around us, our friends or family, or sometimes by nothing at all. Ups and downs, or 'mood swings', are normal, and generally don't cause too many problems.

Normal mood swings can make it hard to know when something's wrong. If you have mood changes that are more severe than normal, or last more than a few days, or stop you from doing things, then it's important to talk to someone and get help.

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a type of mood disorder in which people have times of low mood (major depression) and times of 'high' or elevated mood (mania or hypomania). These episodes usually last at least a week, and affect the way you think, feel and act. They can interfere with relationships, activities and day-to-day function.

The course and severity of bipolar disorder is different for everyone. Some people might have episodes that are close together, while others might have years between episodes when they have no symptoms and function well. Some people have only one or two episodes and then never have another one.

What is a manic episode?

A manic episode is a period of elevated ('high') or irritable mood which lasts at least one week and which can cause disruptions to different parts of your life.

When someone is manic they may experience:

- Elevated mood – feeling euphoric, 'high' or 'on top of the world', or very irritable
- Less need for sleep – sleeping very little without feeling tired
- More energy and activity – having lots of projects or plans, walking long distances, being always 'on the go'
- Racing thoughts and rapid speech – thoughts jumping around from topic to topic, speech that is difficult for others to follow
- Being uninhibited – not caring about what others think, not thinking about the consequences of their behaviour
- Inappropriate behaviour – behaviour that is out of character and potentially harmful, including sexual risk-taking, driving too fast, abusing alcohol or other drugs, or spending large amounts of money
- Grandiose beliefs – believing they have special powers or talents, or that they are someone famous
- Psychotic symptoms – not being in touch with reality, and having hallucinations, delusional ideas, or disorganised thinking and speech

These experiences can feel very confusing and scary, but some people find them enjoyable and may not think there is a problem, and could reject any offers of help.

What is a hypomanic episode?

A hypomanic episode is a milder form of mania. The symptoms are less severe, and might last for a shorter period of time. People do not have psychotic symptoms during hypomania, and often manage to keep functioning.



What is a depressive episode?

A depressive episode is a period of lowered mood, with changes in thinking and behaviour, that lasts at least two weeks.

Typical symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling low in mood – sadness, irritability, tearfulness
- Losing interest in enjoyable activities
- Changes in appetite and weight – eating more or less than usual, gaining or losing weight rapidly
- Changes in sleeping patterns – trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping much more than usual
- Lowered energy and lack of motivation
- Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- Poor concentration and memory problems
- Thoughts about suicide

Types of bipolar disorder

There are two main types of bipolar disorder: bipolar I ('bipolar one') and bipolar II ('bipolar two').

A person with bipolar I disorder will have had at least one episode of mania. Usually the mania is so severe that they will need admission to hospital to keep them safe. They will usually have experienced depression at some time as well.

A person with bipolar II disorder will have had at least one episode of hypomania – the less severe form of mania – as well as an episode of depression. Although bipolar II disorder is sometimes thought of as 'less serious' than bipolar I disorder, it probably affects more people and causes a great amount of disruption to their lives, mainly because of the depressive part of the illness.

It can be difficult to establish whether a person has bipolar I or bipolar II, especially in the early stages of becoming unwell, and a person's diagnosis can change over time as their symptoms change. A proper diagnosis from a health professional like a local doctor (general practitioner – GP) or a psychiatrist is important in order to get the right treatment as quickly as possible.

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Getting help for bipolar disorder

If you think you or a friend might be developing bipolar disorder it's really important to talk about it with a health professional and get some help. Early treatment can stop it getting in the way of the things you want to do in your life, like moving out of home, finishing school, and getting a job. Early treatment can also reduce the risk that you will have problems with your mood in the future.

Medication is an important part of treatment for bipolar disorder, helping people to get well, and then to stay well. Your GP will help you to find a medication that works well for you, and to work out ways to remember to take it.

Psychological treatments will help you to manage negative thoughts and feelings, develop a plan to stop becoming unwell in the future, and take action to improve your overall health and wellbeing.

Other strategies that can be useful in helping to manage bipolar disorder and stay well include:

- Having regular patterns of sleeping and eating
- Looking after your overall health by getting regular exercise and eating healthy food
- Learning to manage stress
- Avoiding alcohol and other drugs
- Keeping in contact with friends and supportive people in your life
- Getting a good balance of rest and activities

Where to get help

GP's and mental health professionals can give you accurate, helpful information about your mental health and arrange treatment when you need it. Find someone you trust and feel comfortable with: there are many GPs and other health professionals who are experienced in working with young people. Contact your local community health centre or **headspace** centre, or perhaps ask a trusted friend, teacher or family member about where to find help.

Remember that it can take time to find the right treatment for you, as every person is different and responds in different ways. Be patient, and make sure you talk to your health professional if you think the treatment has not been helpful, so that they can make changes as early as possible.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit **headspace.org.au**