

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that causes dramatic shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to think clearly. People with bipolar experience high and low moods—known as mania and depression—which differ from the typical ups-and-downs most people experience.

The average age-of-onset is about 25, but it can occur in the teens, or more uncommonly, in childhood. The condition affects men and women equally, with about 2.6% of the U.S. population diagnosed with bipolar disorder and nearly 83% of cases classified as severe.

If left untreated, bipolar disorder usually worsens. However, with a good treatment plan including psychotherapy, medications, a healthy lifestyle, a regular schedule and early identification of symptoms, many people live well with the condition.

notice signs or symptoms

Symptoms and their severity can vary. A person with bipolar disorder may have distinct manic or depressed states but may also have extended periods—sometimes years—without symptoms. A person can also experience both extremes simultaneously or in rapid sequence.

Severe bipolar episodes of mania or depression may include psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions. Usually, these psychotic symptoms mirror a person's extreme mood. People with bipolar disorder who have psychotic symptoms can be wrongly diagnosed as having schizophrenia.

Mania - Although someone with bipolar may find an elevated mood of mania appealing—especially if it occurs after depression—the “high” does not stop at a comfortable or controllable level. Moods can rapidly become more irritable, behavior more unpredictable and judgment more impaired. During periods of mania, people frequently behave impulsively, make reckless decisions and take unusual risks.

Most of the time, people in manic states are unaware of the negative consequences of their actions. With bipolar disorder, suicide is an ever-present danger because some people become suicidal even in manic states. Learning from prior episodes what kinds of behavior signals “red flags” of manic behavior can help manage the symptoms of the illness.

Depression- The lows of bipolar depression are often so debilitating that people may be unable to get out of bed. When people are depressed, even minor decisions such as what to eat for dinner can be overwhelming. They may become obsessed with feelings of loss, personal failure, guilt or helplessness; this negative thinking can lead to thoughts of suicide.

The depressive symptoms that obstruct a person's ability to function must be present nearly every day for a period of at least two weeks for a diagnosis. Depression associated with bipolar disorder may be more difficult to treat and require a customized treatment plan.

Treatment

Bipolar disorder is treated and managed in several ways:

Medications, such as mood stabilizers, antipsychotic medications and, to a lesser extent, antidepressants.

Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and family-focused therapy.

Self-management strategies, like education and recognition of an episode's early symptoms.

Complementary health approaches, such as aerobic exercise, meditation, faith and prayer can support, but not replace, treatment.