

Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder, or bipolar mood disorder, used to be called 'manic depression'. It is a psychiatric illness characterised by extreme mood swings. A person may feel euphoric and extremely energetic, only to drop into a period of paralysing depression, in a cycle of elation and sadness. The exact cause is unknown and a number of factors may be involved, although a genetic predisposition has been clearly established.

It is estimated that around one in 50 Australians develops this illness, which affects men and women equally. Most of those affected are aged in their 20s when first diagnosed.

Alternating bouts of mania and depression

Bipolar disorder typically involves extreme moods of mania and depression – each lasting days, weeks or even months. Some people experience more highs than lows, others report more lows than highs. The severity of the mood swings and the symptoms will also vary from person to person. The person may be affected so much that they experience the symptoms of psychosis and are unable to distinguish what is real.

Mania

Common symptoms include:

- Feeling extremely euphoric or energetic.
- Going without sleep.
- Thinking and speaking quickly.
- Delusions of importance.
- Reckless behaviour, such as overspending.
- Extreme sexual behaviour.
- Aggression.
- Irritability.
- Grandiose, unrealistic plans.

Depression

Common symptoms include:

- Withdrawal from people and activities.
- Overpowering feelings of sadness and hopelessness.
- Lack of appetite and weight loss.
- Feeling anxious or guilty without reason.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviour.

A range of contributing factors

The underlying mechanisms of bipolar disorder are not fully understood, although a strong genetic predisposition has been established. One theory is that the illness might be linked to particular brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) that help regulate mood, called serotonin and norepinephrine. In a person with bipolar disorder, it is thought that these chemicals are easily thrown out of balance.

Other contributing factors may include environmental stressors which can trigger episodes of illness.

Acute episodes need treatment

When people experience an acute episode of mania or depression, they often require immediate care and treatment. These episodes can often be prevented by regular medication like lithium.

Type of help available

Treatment depends on the severity of the condition, but options may include:

- Mood-stabilising drugs, such as lithium.
- Antidepressants for depression.
- A range of drugs for mania, such as sedatives or tranquillisers.
- Counselling and education to help the person understand and manage their condition.
- Community support programs, which provide rehabilitation, accommodation and employment support.
- Self-help groups for emotional support and understanding.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychiatrist
- Psychiatric hospital
- SANE Helpline. Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)

Things to remember

- Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric illness characterised by severe mood swings.
- The exact cause is unknown, but contributing factors may include genetics, brain chemicals and stress.
- Treatment includes medication and community support.
- Environmental stressors can trigger episodes of illness.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SANE Australia

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