

Introduction

Bipolar disorder is a serious mental disorder. People who have bipolar disorder feel very happy and energized some days, and very sad and depressed on other days.

Abnormal and risky behaviors caused by mood swings can cause people affected by bipolar disorder to lose jobs, friends and money. It can also lead to substance abuse and addiction. In some cases, it may lead to suicide.

It is estimated that up to 2% of the population may have bipolar disorder. If not treated, bipolar disorder keeps getting worse as the mood shift becomes frequent and more severe. If treated, it can be managed and people can lead successful lives.

This reference summary explains bipolar disorder. It discusses its symptoms, causes, diagnosis and treatment options.



Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a serious brain disorder. People with bipolar disorder go through unusual mood changes from very happy to very sad and depressed. Bipolar disorder is also called manic-depressive illness.

It is normal for people to experience some emotional ups and downs from time to time. But for people with bipolar disorder, the mood swings are much more powerful than the normal ups and downs everyone has.

When people with bipolar disorder feel very happy and up, they are also much more active than usual. This is called mania.

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Mania can be euphoric, where the person feels extremely optimistic, powerful and energetic. It can also be dysphoric, where the person feels irritable, agitated and impatient.

During a manic stage or episode, the patient has unrealistically elevated self-regard, which can result in risky behavior with disastrous consequences. Examples are gambling, unsafe sex and impulsive spending on credit cards.

When people with bipolar disorder feel very sad and down, they are much less active. This is called depression. They become tired, don't sleep well, and cannot concentrate or make decisions. In some cases, patients may think of hurting themselves or committing suicide.

The intense emotional states of mania and depression that people with bipolar disorder go through are called mood episodes. Sometimes, a mood episode includes symptoms of both mania and depression. This is called a mixed state. For example, in a mixed state the person may feel very sad or hopeless while feeling extremely energized.

Bipolar disorder usually lasts a lifetime. Episodes of mania and depression typically come back over time. Between episodes, many people with bipolar disorder are free of symptoms. But some people may have lingering symptoms.



Anyone can develop bipolar disorder. It often starts in a person's late teen or early adult years. But children and adults can have bipolar disorder too. The illness usually lasts a lifetime.

Anxiety disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and social phobia, often affect people with bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder may also accompany a case of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. These disorders have symptoms that may overlap with those of bipolar disorder, making it more difficult to diagnose bipolar disorder.

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Causes

Scientists are learning about the possible causes of bipolar disorder. Most scientists agree that there is no single cause. Instead, many factors likely act together to produce the illness or increase risk.

Children with a parent or sibling who has bipolar disorder are about five times more likely to develop the illness, compared with children who do not have a family history of bipolar disorder. But most children with a family history of bipolar disorder will not develop the illness.



The causes of bipolar disorder aren't very well understood. There are other factors beyond family history that seem to play a role. Some studies show that certain structures and functions of the brain of people with bipolar disorder seem to be different.

Symptoms

Bipolar mood changes are called mood episodes. People may have manic episodes, depressive episodes, or mixed episodes. A mood episode is usually preceded by a lack of sleep or early morning waking. Recognizing a change in sleeping patterns can help predict a mood episode.

Mood episodes are intense. The feelings are strong and happen along with extreme changes in behavior. These mood episodes cause symptoms that last a week or two, sometimes longer. During an episode, the symptoms last every day for most of the day.

During a manic episode, people with bipolar disorder may:

- Feel very up or high, an overly happy outgoing mood.
- Feel jumpy or wired.
- Feel extremely irritable and agitated.

Behaviors change during a manic episode. People with bipolar disorder may:

- Talk really fast and not stay on topic.
- Have trouble relaxing or sleeping.
- Think they can do a lot of things at once.

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- Be more active than usual.
- Take on new big projects.

During a manic episode, people with bipolar disorder may be impulsive and reckless. They may:

- Do things impulsively.
- Spend or invest a lot of money without careful planning.
- Have reckless sex or do pleasurable behaviors without thinking of the consequence.



During a depressive episode, people with bipolar disorder may:

- Feel very down or sad.
- Feel worried and empty.
- Feel less interest in activities they used to enjoy.
- Feel tired or slowed down.

The behaviors during a depressive episode change. People with bipolar disorder may:

- Have trouble concentrating and making decisions.
- Forget things a lot.
- Lose interest in fun activities and become less active.
- Have trouble sleeping.

During a depressive episode, people with bipolar disorder may think about death, suicide or inflicting self-harm.



During a mixed state, symptoms often include agitation, trouble sleeping, major changes in appetite and suicidal thoughts. People in a mixed state may feel very sad or hopeless while feeling extremely energized.

Sometimes, psychotic symptoms may develop, such as hallucinations or delusions. The psychotic symptoms often reflect the person's extreme mood. For example, psychotic symptoms for a person having a manic episode may include believing he or she is famous, has a lot of money or has special powers. In the same way, a person

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having a depressive episode may believe he or she is ruined and penniless, or has committed a crime.

Episodes of bipolar disorder may be severe, short or frequent. Episodes of mania and depression may be mild. A mild manic episode is known as hypomania. Episodes of bipolar disorder may be separated by long or short periods of normal mood. In some cases, there may never be a normal mood, but a chronic low-grade high or low. Because of the different patterns of bipolar disease, health care providers call the illness Bipolar Spectrum Disorders.

When to See a Health Care Provider

It is important to treat bipolar disorder early so it does not get worse and affect family, friends, work, finances and health. But it is not always easy to distinguish the signs of bipolar disorder.

In cases of full-blown manic episodes, the patient may feel it and know about it. These patients lose jobs, friends and often need hospitalization. If you or your loved one have a manic episode, seek medical help without delay.

It is more difficult to distinguish a mild manic episode from normal feeling good moods. Feeling good for two days after achieving success at school or work is normal. If it is followed by depression, it is not.

Frequent periods of intense happiness followed by intense sadness are not normal. If this cycle of ups and downs happens more than once, it is not normal and you should seek medical help.

Many people with bipolar disorder seek medical help when they feel depressed. If they do not observe their mood swings and communicate them well to their health care provider, they may be misdiagnosed with depression. A misdiagnosis can cause problems related to treatment.



The treatment of bipolar disorder is different than that of depression. The use of mood stabilizing medication is important when using anti-depressant medication. Using anti-depressants without a mood stabilizer to treat bipolar disorder could make the illness worse.

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Diagnosis

Bipolar disorder cannot currently be identified through a blood test or a brain scan. But these tests can help rule out other diseases that can produce similar symptoms, such as a stroke, head trauma or a brain tumor.

If the problems are not caused by other illnesses, the health care provider may conduct a mental health evaluation. The health care provider may also provide a referral to a trained mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, who is experienced in diagnosing and treating bipolar disorder.



Other illnesses can make it hard to diagnose and treat bipolar disorder. A health care provider may think the person has a different illness, like depression and schizophrenia. People with depression do not have mania. People with schizophrenia have hallucination and delusions, which can be symptoms in some cases of bipolar disorder.

The health care provider or mental health professional should get a complete history of symptoms and the family medical history. The patient and the patient's family should be ready to answer questions related to their emotional and social wellbeing.

If the health care provider diagnoses bipolar disorder, he or she tries to determine its type. There are several types of bipolar disorder. They differ by the length, intensity and frequency of the episodes as well as the period of normal mood between the episodes.

Bipolar I Disorder is characterized by severe highs and severe lows.

Bipolar II Disorder is characterized by mild highs and severe lows. Though the highs are mild, bipolar II disorders are serious because they come with severe depression and can transform into the more severe type I if not treated.

Cyclothymic Disorder is characterized by frequent, continuous mild highs and mild lows.

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Some people may be diagnosed with Rapid-Cycling Bipolar Disorder. This is when a person has four or more episodes of major depression, mania, hypomania or mixed symptoms within a year. Some people with rapid-cycling bipolar disorder experience more than one episode in a week, or even within a day. Children and adolescents who have bipolar disorder are more likely than adults to have this type.

Treatment

Right now, there is no cure for bipolar disorder. But medications and psychotherapy can help control the symptoms of most people with bipolar disorder. Other treatment options are available if medications and psychotherapy do not help.



Different types of medication can help reduce symptoms and prevent recurrence of episodes. People respond to medications in different ways, so the type of medication depends on the patient. Sometimes a person needs to try different medications to see which are best.

Medications can cause side effects. Patients should always tell their health care provider about these problems. Also, patients should not stop taking a medication without a health care provider's help. Stopping medication suddenly can be dangerous, and it can make bipolar symptoms worse.

Different kinds of psychotherapy can help people with bipolar disorder. During psychotherapy, a trained professional talks with the patient and sometimes with the patient's parents. The aim is to identify what triggers mood swings and determine how they can be minimized and controlled. Psychotherapy can help patients and their families change their behavior to reduce mood swings. It can also help patients get along better with family and friends.

Some people do not get better with medication and psychotherapy. These people may try electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT. This is sometimes called shock therapy. ECT provides a quick shock that can sometimes correct problems in the brain.

Sometimes people take herbal and natural supplements, such as St. John's wort or omega-3 fatty acids, to help with bipolar disorder. Talk with your health care provider before taking any supplement. Scientists aren't sure how these products affect people with bipolar disorder.

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Summary

Bipolar disorder is a serious mental illness that causes intense mood swings. People with bipolar disorder experience mood episodes that range from overly energetic or irritable, to sad and hopeless, and then back again. They often have normal moods in between. The up feeling is called mania. The down feeling is depression.

Bipolar disorder usually lasts a lifetime. Episodes of mania and depression typically come back over time. Between episodes, many people with bipolar disorder are free of symptoms. Anyone can develop bipolar disorder.

Bipolar disorder can run in families. It usually starts in late adolescence or early adulthood. If you think you may have it, tell your health care provider. A medical checkup can rule out other illnesses that might cause your mood changes.

Untreated, bipolar disorder can result in damaged relationships, poor job or school performance, and even suicide. Medications and psychotherapy can help control the symptoms of most people with bipolar disorder. Other treatment options are available if medications and psychotherapy do not help.



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