



PATIENT EDUCATION

*Understanding Bipolar Disorder*

learning **EDUCATION** EXCELLENCE  
**HEALTHY** CARING INTERACTION  
**LIVING**

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# *Bipolar Disorder – 10 Points to Know*

1. Millions of people have bipolar disorder; it is a treatable disease.
2. People with bipolar disorder have extreme mood swings.
3. A diagnosis is made after getting information from you, your family members and friends.
4. Bipolar disorder affects parts of the brain controlling emotion, thought and drive and is most likely caused by a complex set of genetic and environmental factors.
5. Be aware of changes in behavior or feelings indicating changes in mood.
6. Medications are key to treating bipolar disorder. Know what they are, doses and possible side effects.
7. Never stop taking medications on your own. Always take your medication as prescribed.
8. Psychotherapy is often used with medications; a therapist can help you have a healthier lifestyle and learn about what triggers worsen the illness.
9. Grass roots organizations such as the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) or the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) provide support and education.
10. Do not use alcohol or recreational drugs. They may interfere with your treatment.



# Introduction

## Key Messages

- Bipolar disorder is treatable.
- People with bipolar disorder have extreme mood swings.
- It tends to run in families and it can be caused by stressful events.
- It involves brain chemicals that regulate emotion.
- Getting medical care can help you, your family and friends.

## Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder is a treatable mood disorder in which people have extreme mood swings that include emotional highs (manias) and lows (depression) (Figure 1). Bipolar disorder was formerly called manic depression or manic-depressive illness. These mood swings are more severe than normal ups and downs in mood and can last from a few days to several months.

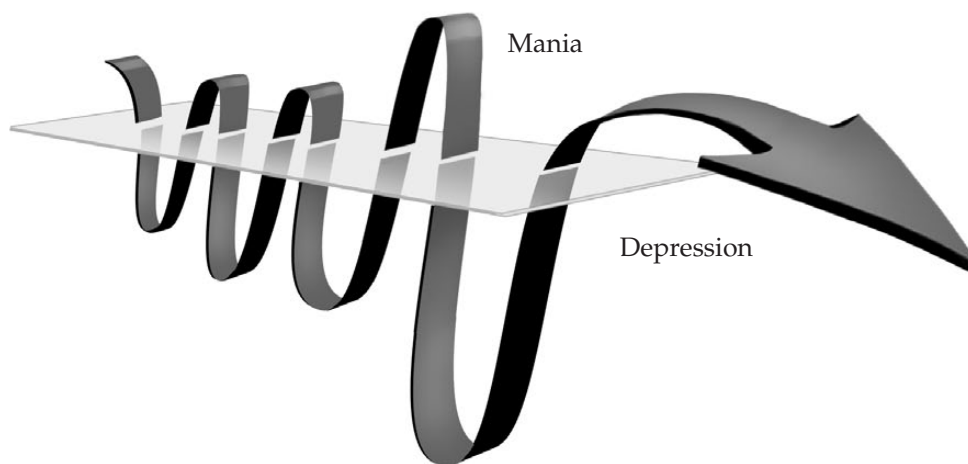


Figure 1. Bipolar disorder

Bipolar I disorder affects roughly one percent of the adult population and tends to run in families. Bipolar disorder affects men and women in equal numbers. The disorder also happens in children and teens (adolescents) but exact figures are not known. Noticing symptoms in children can be hard because they are often mistaken for disruptive disorders that are common in this age group.

Bipolar disorder is a brain disease. The disease involves an imbalance of brain chemicals in the areas of the brain that regulate emotion, thinking processes, and energy. Although the exact cause is not known, scientists believe you are more likely to have bipolar disorder if it runs in your family; the illness sometimes happens when you experience stressful events. Examples of such events might include a job promotion or serious relationship problem.

Increased awareness and early detection of this disorder are very important. If you have bipolar disorder you may not see how impaired you are when having a mood episode. You may not realize how the disorder affects your life and the lives of others. If manic symptoms are left untreated, you can put yourself into unhealthy, illegal, or life-threatening situations because of potentially impaired judgment and impulsive behavior. There is also a greater risk of suicide. Getting the necessary medical care can help avoid needless suffering for you, your family and your friends.

# Chapter One: Mood Episodes

## Key Messages

- Symptoms that happen over a certain period are called “episodes”.
- Manic episode: at least one a week where mood is abnormally high or more irritable than usual.
- Hypomanic episode: less severe or lighter (“paler”) form of mania, but can be a high or irritable mood.
- Depressive episode: at least two weeks of sadness and loss of pleasure in what were once enjoyable activities.
- Mixed episode: both manic and depressive symptoms.

## Mania or a manic episode

You are having a manic episode if your mood is unusually and persistently high or if you are unusually irritable for at least one week. This mood disturbance must be severe enough to disrupt your ability to function at home, work or school and be associated with many of these additional symptoms:

- Increased physical energy and mental activity
- Feelings of extreme wellbeing and feeling good about things
- Inflated or elevated self-esteem
- Fast or pressured speech, racing or crowded thoughts
- Extreme irritability
- Easily distracted
- Needing less sleep
- Poor judgment
- Spending sprees
- Increased sexual drive

In most severe cases, you may believe in things that are not true (delusions) and think you see, hear and smell things that are not real (hallucinations).

## Hypomanic episode

A milder level of mania is called hypomania. The symptoms are identical to those seen in a manic episode. In a hypomanic episode, the changes in your mood are not severe enough to keep you from functioning or to require that you be hospitalized. Some hypomanic episodes may turn into full manic episodes.