
Bipolar disorder

Summary

- Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric illness that involves severe mood swings.
 - The exact cause is unknown, but contributing factors may include genetics, brain chemicals and stress.
 - Treatment includes medication and community support.
 - Stresses in life can trigger episodes of illness in those who are vulnerable.
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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 followed by 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.

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 reality from fantasy.

Bipolar disorder and mania

Common symptoms include:

- feeling extremely euphoric ('high') or energetic
- going without sleep
- thinking and speaking quickly
- delusions of importance
- reckless behaviour, such as overspending
- unsafe sexual activity
- aggression
- irritability
- grandiose, unrealistic plans.

Bipolar disorder and 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.

Risk factors for bipolar disorder

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) called serotonin and norepinephrine that help regulate mood. In a person with bipolar disorder, it is thought that these chemicals are easily thrown out of balance.

Other contributing factors may include stressors in life that can trigger episodes of illness.

Treatment for acute episodes of bipolar disorder

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 such as lithium.

Treatment for bipolar disorder

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

- mood-stabilising medications such as lithium
- antidepressants for depression
- a range of medications 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
- SANE Australia Helpline Tel. 1800 187 263
- **SANE Helpline Chat** – chat live with a SANE Helpline Advisor (Monday to Friday, 9 am – 5 pm)
- **SANE peer support moderated forums**

Things to remember

- Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric illness that involves severe mood swings.
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- Treatment includes medication and community support.
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