

# Bipolar Disorder

## What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a neuropsychiatric condition which affects about 1% of the population. It is a brain condition which causes shifts in mood, energy, activity levels and the ability to perform daily tasks. Although mood changes are normal, in bipolar disorder the changes are severe and unpredictable. A person with bipolar disorder, experiences mood fluctuations between the extremes of very low energy and activity levels, to very high energy and activity levels.

## What causes bipolar disorder?

There is currently no known single cause of bipolar disorder. It is a complex condition that is likely to be caused by many factors. It is known that bipolar disorder can often run in families (in other words, children who have a parent or sibling with bipolar disorder may be more likely to develop the illness than a person with no family history), and so it is likely to have a genetic component to its cause. It is possible that certain mistakes, or mutations, in particular genes (the information that is passed on from a parent to a child) may place an individual at a greater risk of developing bipolar disorder.

However, genes are not the only risk factor for developing this illness. Studies with identical twins, who share exactly the same genes, have shown that if one twin develops bipolar disorder this does not necessarily mean that the other twin will also develop bipolar disorder. It is thought that bipolar disorder develops because of the combined effects of genetic and environmental factors.

## What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

People with bipolar disorder usually experience distinct periods of intense emotional states, called "mood episodes". These mood episodes are not short-lived, but commonly last for several days, even weeks.

Each mood episode represents a drastic shift from the person's usual mood and behaviour and tend to represent two extreme emotional states; the manic episode and the depressive episode. During a manic episode a person can

feel overly joyful or overexcited and may feel that they are able to achieve anything. This state is often accompanied by high energy levels and lack of sleep. During a depressive episode a person can feel extremely sad or hopeless and may be unable to get out of bed. This state is often accompanied by very low energy levels, lack of motivation and extreme fatigue. At times, a single mood episode may include symptoms from both mania and depression. This is called a mixed state.

## Symptoms of mania or a manic episode include:

### Mood changes

- A long period of feeling "high," or an overly happy or outgoing mood
- Extreme irritability

### Behavioural changes

- Talking very fast, jumping from one idea to another, having racing thoughts
- Being easily distracted
- Increasing activities, such as taking on new projects
- Being overly restless
- Sleeping little or not being tired
- Having an unrealistic belief in one's abilities
- Behaving impulsively and engaging in pleasurable, high-risk behaviours

## Symptoms of depression or a depressive episode include:

### Mood changes

- An overly long period of feeling sad or hopeless
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex.

### Behavioural changes

- Feeling tired or "slowed down"
- Having problems concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- Being restless or irritable
- Changing eating, sleeping, or other habits
- Thinking of death or suicide, or attempting suicide.

For some people, the symptoms of bipolar disorder are not as extreme. An emotional state called "hypomania" exists where a person with bipolar disorder may feel happy, have increased productivity and feel that nothing is wrong.



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However, without treatment this may develop into a severe manic episode, or a depressive episode.

Sometimes, a person with severe episodes of mania or depression can also experience psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations or delusions. The psychotic symptoms tend to reflect the person's extreme mood. For example, if the psychotic symptoms are being experienced during a manic episode, the person may believe they are famous, have a lot of money, or have special powers. Alternatively, if the psychotic symptoms are being experienced during a depressive episode, the person may believe they are ruined and penniless, or that they have committed a crime. As a result, people with bipolar disorder who have psychotic symptoms are sometimes misdiagnosed as having schizophrenia.

Bipolar disorder most commonly develops during a person's late teens or early adult years and is a condition that usually lasts a lifetime.

## How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

At present, there is no single test that can be performed to diagnose bipolar disorder. A diagnosis of bipolar disorder requires a physical examination, interview and lab tests performed by a medical doctor or mental health specialist, such as a psychiatrist. A careful history of the patient and their family is taken to identify if bipolar disorder is present in the family, if the behaviour being exhibited by the patient is out of character and whether or not the patient is experiencing both manic and depressive episodes. It is important for the patient's treatment and management to rule out other factors which may cause mood changes such as stroke, a brain tumour or a thyroid condition, and to determine whether the patient actually has bipolar disorder and not major depression or schizophrenia.

## How is bipolar disorder treated?

Bipolar disorder can not be cured, but with ongoing treatment the changes in mood can largely be controlled. The most successful treatments include a combination of medications and psychotherapy. The types of medications

generally used to treat bipolar disorder include mood stabilizers, atypical antipsychotics, and antidepressants. Any medications taken should be under the careful observation of a health professional. When done in combination with medication, psychotherapy can be an effective treatment for bipolar disorder. It can provide support, education, and guidance to people with bipolar disorder and their families.

## Useful websites and resources:

- UCT Human Genetic website:  
[www.humangenetics.uct.ac.za](http://www.humangenetics.uct.ac.za)
- Royal College of Psychiatrists website:  
[www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)
- Patients like me website:  
[www.patientslikeme.com](http://www.patientslikeme.com)
- National Institute of Mental Health website:  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- South African Bipolar website:  
[www.bipolar.co.za](http://www.bipolar.co.za)

## Bipolar support groups:

Western Cape Bipolar Support Association  
Jay – 072 424 1812  
Michelle – 082 412 4448  
Email: [info@bipolar.co.za](mailto:info@bipolar.co.za)

## To find out about research happening at the University of Cape Town:

Tel: (021) 406 6297, or  
Tel: (021) 406 6467