

Bipolar Disorder

Parent/Patient Education

Introduction

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that can cause unusual shifts in a person's mood, energy, activity levels, and concentration. These shifts are referred to as mood episodes, during which time an individual acts out of character and may not realize the effects their behaviors can have. There are several different types of bipolar disorder, each of which can interfere with one's ability to carry out day-to-day tasks (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Disorder Types

For someone with bipolar disorder, moods range from being extremely "up," elated, irritable, or energized (manic episodes), to very "down," sad, indifferent, or hopeless (depressive episodes). Bipolar disorder is usually diagnosed in late adolescence or early adulthood, but symptoms can appear in childhood.

Bipolar I Disorder. Defined by manic episodes that last for **at least 7 days** (nearly every day for most of the day), or a manic episode so severe that a person needs hospitalization. Depressive symptoms may occur also, typically lasting **about 2 weeks**.

Bipolar II Disorder. Defined by depressive episodes and hypomanic episodes. Hypomanic episodes are less severe than manic episodes, for example, not lasting for at least 7 days or requiring medical care. During a hypomanic episode, a person may experience heightened mood but be able to keep up with daily life and responsibilities. The individual may not feel that anything is wrong, but friends or family might see a noticeable change.

Cyclothymic Disorder. Also called Cyclothymia, this disorder is defined by recurring hypomanic and depressive symptoms, however, the symptoms do not meet criteria for actual episodes. In other words, a person is experiencing symptoms, but these symptoms are not severe enough or last long enough to be an actual manic or depressive episode.

National Institute of Mental Health (2023)

Signs & Symptoms

Bipolar disorder is not the typical ups and downs that children and adolescents go through. The mood changes are more severe, often unprovoked, and accompanied by changes in sleep, energy level, and thinking patterns.

Symptoms of a Manic Episode:

- Feeling very high or elevated, or, extremely irritable or touchy
- Feeling jumpy, wired, or more active than usual
- Having a decreased need for sleep
- “Flight of ideas,” or talking fast about many different things
- Racing thoughts
- Increased trouble focusing
- Having an excessive appetite for food, drinking, sex, or other pleasurable activities
- Feeling unusually important, powerful, or talented



Symptoms of a Depressive Episode:

- Feeling very sad, down, or anxious
- Feeling slowed down or restless
- Having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- Talking very slowly or forgetting what to say
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Struggling to do simple, everyday tasks
- Frequent complaints of physical pain, such as stomach aches or headaches
- Lacking interest in activities
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Having thoughts about death or suicide

National Institute of Mental Health (2023)

Risk Factors

Genetics. Research has shown that individuals who have a close family member with bipolar disorder have an increased chance of having the disorder themselves. However, just because one family member has the disorder, doesn't mean other members will have it. Many genes are involved in the disorder, and no single gene causes it.

Biological Differences. According to Mayo Clinic (2022), individuals with bipolar disorder appear to have physical changes in their brain. However, the significance of these changes is still uncertain.

Environmental Stress. If someone is already at risk of developing bipolar disorder, stressful life events could trigger mood episodes. Examples include losing a loved one, going through a breakup, or a traumatic event. Use of drugs or alcohol to cope with stress can also be a trigger for symptoms.

Mayo Clinic (2022)

National Institute of Mental Health (2023)

Treatment & Coping Mechanisms

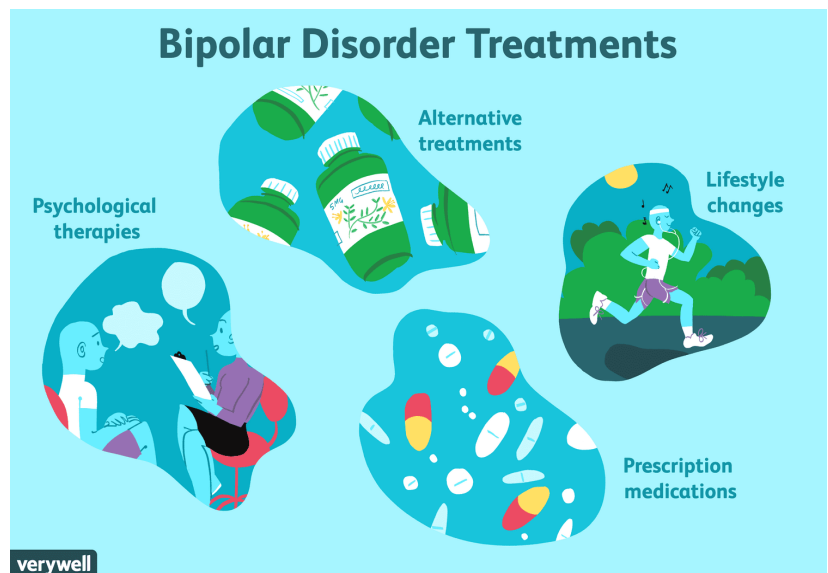
Talking with a healthcare provider is the first step of treatment. Your doctor can complete a physical exam or medical tests to rule out other possible causes and may refer you to a mental health professional if further evaluation is necessary. Diagnosis is typically made based on a person's symptoms, experiences, lifetime history, and family history.

Medication is the “cornerstone” for treatment. Mood stabilizers, specifically, are believed to correct imbalanced brain signaling. They are often prescribed as they help manage symptoms, prevent mood episodes, or reduce their severity. Since bipolar disorder is a chronic illness, ongoing preventive treatment with medication is recommended.

Psychotherapy or counseling is another beneficial part of treatment, as it aims to help people identify and change distressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Counseling also helps individuals learn about their illness and adhere to medications, which can prevent worsening of symptoms.

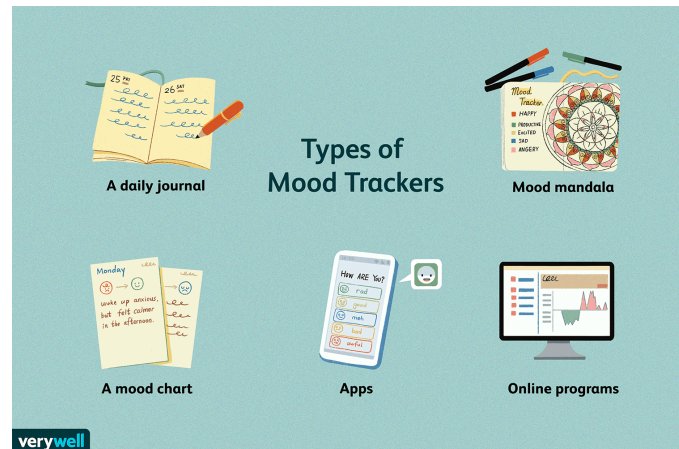
Coping Mechanisms for bipolar disorder can help manage daily symptoms. While living with bipolar disorder requires certain adjustments, there are many things you can do to cope and stay on track:

- **Get to Know Your Moods.** According to Mind (2022), understanding your moods is one of the first steps in learning to manage them. One of the best ways to do this is to track your mood (and how it changes) over a long period of time. There are many ways to do this, whether it be writing notes down, using a written mood log, or mood tracking app



on your phone!

- **Understand Your Triggers.** As you track your mood, you may notice certain patterns or “triggers,” meaning things that can affect your mood on a daily basis. Triggers are different for everyone, but common examples include being stressed, overwhelmed, or lack of sleep. Other triggers include significant life events such as losing a loved one, a breakup, financial difficulties, or friendship stress. Once you identify your triggers, you can be more mindful, try to avoid the trigger altogether, or problem-solve.



- **Learn Your “Warning Signs.”** Before a mood episode, you may notice changes in your sleeping patterns, eating habits, thoughts, or behavior. If you know you’re about to experience a change in mood, knowing the signs can help you put support systems in place early. Share your warning signs with trusted friends or family and ask them for help in keeping up with your treatment plan.

Warning signs of depression

You've stopped cooking your own meals.
You've stopped mixing with friends.
People bother you.
You crave sugary food such as chocolate.
You're getting frequent headaches.
You don't care about others.
You need more sleep and take naps during the day.

Warning signs of mania or hypomania

You can't concentrate.
You find myself reading lots of books at once.
You're talking faster than normal.
You feel irritable.
You're hungry all the time.
Friends have commented on your irritable mood.
You have more energy than usual so need to be moving.

- **Self-Care and Routine.** In addition to social support, make sure that you're taking care of yourself. Make time for relaxation, mindfulness, and other hobbies you enjoy. According to Help Guide (2024), other coping tools include decreasing stress or activity, attending a support group, and increasing your exposure to light/nature. Make day-to-day activities routine, such as eating, sleeping, and exercise. Also, taking your medication at the same time each day! Having structure and routine can calm you when your mood is high, motivate you if your mood is low, and generally help you feel more stable.
- **Be Patient With Yourself.** It's normal to want things to improve right away, however, it's important to be patient with yourself and the treatment process. Remember to communicate regularly with social supports and your providers. Be open and honest

about your condition, your needs, and any medication side effects. Be sure to take your medication as prescribed and continue with counseling and/or other coping mechanisms.

American Psychiatric Association (2021)
Help Guide (2024)
Mind (2022)
National Institute for Mental Health (2023)

Additional Tips & Information:

- According to the National Institute for Mental Health (2023), it isn't uncommon for someone with bipolar disorder to have other mental health conditions, including anxiety, ADHD, an eating disorder, or substance use disorder. Individuals with severe manic or depressive episodes may experience psychosis, which can include delusions or hallucinations.
- When discussing medication, your provider may suggest prescribing an anti-depressant to treat sleep or anxiety related symptoms. It's important to note that when taking an anti-depressant, a mood stabilizer must be taken as well. For individuals with bipolar disorder, solely taking an anti-depressant can trigger a manic episode or rapid cycling (experiencing four or more episodes of mania or depression in one year).
- If your child has bipolar disorder, there are many things you can do to help support them. For instance, be patient, and let your child know you are there to talk and listen. Also, be mindful of your child's moods, and pay close attention to any major or severe changes. Understanding triggers can be especially important for managing mood episodes. Lastly, work together with your child to learn and practice coping mechanisms for stress, anxiety, irritability, or depressed mood.
- Have an action plan in case of crisis or emergency. If your child is experiencing a mood episode and becomes a danger to themselves or others, it's time to seek professional help right away. According to Help Guide (2024), this action plan should include several things. First, knowing crisis resources in your area, such as the nearest hospitals or information for Mobile Crisis. Additionally, contact information for your providers, including doctor's, counselors, or other specialists. Other information, such as a list of medications, coping mechanisms, and extra social supports are beneficial.

Hotlines and support

In the U.S. Call the [NAMI HelpLine](#) at 1-800-950-6264 or find [DBSA Chapters/Support Groups](#) in your area. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)

Help Guide (2024)
National Institute of Mental Health (2023)

Additional Materials & Resources:

Books: The Bipolar Child by Demitri and Janice Papolos, Brandon and the Bipolar Bear by Tracy Anglada, Family Experiences of Bipolar Disorder by Cara Aiken

Mood Tracking Apps: Daylio, eMoods, Sleep Cycle: Sleep Tracker

Additional Apps: Calm, Headspace, CBT Companion, Medisafe Pill & Med Reminder

References:

American Psychiatric Association (2021)

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