

what is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a type of mood disorder where people experience times of excessive low and high mood.

It can affect the way people think, feel and act to the point where it interferes with daily life. While coping can be tough, with the right support, things can get better.

Most people who develop bipolar disorder will have experienced symptoms by the age of 25.

Regular emotions vs bipolar disorder

It's normal to experience a range of emotions in our lives. Emotions can be affected by the things going on around us, things going on with friends or family, stressful events, or sometimes by nothing at all.

These ups and downs are common and generally don't cause too many problems. They can build our resilience and help us to learn how to manage difficult situations, and highs and lows in the future.

Bipolar disorder is different to general mood changes or anger outbursts. Mood changes associated with bipolar disorder are more extreme, last longer and have a significant impact on someone's ability to function as they normally would.

Dealing with bipolar disorder

A person diagnosed with bipolar disorder will experience times of low mood (clinical depression) and times of high or elevated mood (mania).

These episodes or changes last at least a week and affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts. This can interfere with relationships, work or study and day-to-day living.

The experience of bipolar disorder is different for everyone. Some people will have one or two episodes and then never have another one, while others have several episodes close together. Many people diagnosed with bipolar disorder lead full productive lives and have years without symptoms between episodes.

Bipolar episodes

What is a depressive episode?

A depressive episode is a period of lowered mood, with changes in thinking and behaviour that usually lasts for at least two weeks. It has a significant impact on a person's day-to-day life.

Changes include:

- low mood – sadness, irritability, tearfulness
- losing interest in enjoyable activities
- changes in appetite and weight – eating more or less than usual, gaining or losing weight rapidly
- changes in sleeping patterns – trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping much more than usual
- lowered energy and lack of motivation
- feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- difficulty with concentration and memory
- thoughts about suicide.

What is a manic episode?

A manic episode is a period of constant and unusually elevated ('high') or irritable mood, and a noticeable increase in energy or activity.

This generally lasts at least a week and is very different from someone's normal state. It leads to a range of difficulties that have a big impact on a person's daily life.

Someone experiencing mania may have:

- Elevated mood. Feeling euphoric, 'high' or 'on top of the world', or very irritable.
- Less need for sleep. Sleeping very little without feeling tired.
- More energy, activity and drive. Having lots of projects or plans, walking long distances, being always 'on the go'.
- Racing thoughts and rapid speech. Thoughts speeding around from topic to topic, speech that's difficult for others to follow.
- Being disinhibited. Engaging in high-risk behaviours that are out of character and potentially harmful, like sexual risk-taking, driving too fast, abusing alcohol or other drugs, or spending large amounts of money.
- Inflated self-esteem. Ranging from exaggerated, uncritical self-confidence to 'grandiose' beliefs (e.g. the person saying they have special powers or talents).
- Psychotic symptoms. For example, hearing or seeing things that aren't experienced by anyone else (i.e. hallucinations) or having intensely strong beliefs about something that's only real to them (i.e. delusions). These usually match the person's elevated mood.



Important: If someone is experiencing these symptoms, take them seriously and ensure they access professional support.

The experience of bipolar disorder is different for everyone, and there are also different types of bipolar. Whether these experiences are pleasant or frightening, some people may be reluctant to get help. They may not believe that they're unwell or that they need treatment. They may also be feeling very suspicious or confused, making it hard for them to trust others.

How can I get help?

Getting help early on is especially important for anyone experiencing symptoms of bipolar, as it can have a big impact on all areas of life.

Seeking support early can reduce the likelihood that you'll have problems in the future, and help you stay healthy and learn skills to get through episodes of illness.

A mental health professional, a general practitioner (GP) or psychiatrist will work with you and the important people in your life to help you to understand your experiences and develop a support plan.

A support plan will usually involve a combination of medication and psychological therapies. Your GP or psychiatrist can help you to find a medication that works for you. Psychological therapies can help you to understand your mood patterns, manage difficult thoughts and feelings, and develop a plan to avoid becoming unwell in the future.

Strategies usually include:

- having regular patterns of sleeping and eating
- looking after your overall health with exercise and healthy food
- learning to manage stress
- avoiding alcohol and other drugs
- keeping in contact with supportive people
- getting a good balance of rest and activities
- learning to recognise your 'warning signs' and ways to manage them.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)



If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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