

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

workers

Bipolar Disorder



Everyone experiences a range of emotions and feelings in their lives, which can be influenced by the things going on around them, the people in their lives, or sometimes by nothing at all. The way that someone is feeling at any one time is called their mood.

Ups and downs in a person's mood are normal, and young people in particular can experience 'mood swings' as part of normal adolescent development. This can make it difficult to know when changes in a young person's mood are becoming a problem and might require treatment from a health professional.

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder characterised by episodes of lowered mood (major depression) and periods of 'high' or elevated mood (mania or hypomania). By definition, these episodes last at least a week and are disruptive to a person's life, potentially impacting on their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, relationships, activities and day-to-day functioning.

The course and severity of bipolar disorder varies from person to person – some people might experience episodes that are close together, while others will have long periods of time between episodes when they have no symptoms and function well. Other people will have one or two episodes in their life and never go on to experience another one.

What is a manic episode?

A manic episode is a sustained period of elevated or irritable mood which lasts at least one week and which causes significant disruption to the young person's life.

When a young person is manic they may experience:

- 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 and activity – having lots of projects or plans, walking long distances, being always 'on the go'
- Racing thoughts and rapid speech – thoughts jumping around from topic to topic, speech that is difficult for others to follow
- Being uninhibited – not caring about what others think, not thinking about the consequences of their behaviour
- Inappropriate behaviour – behaviour that is out of character and potentially harmful, including sexual risk-taking, driving too fast, abusing alcohol or other drugs, or spending large amounts of money
- Grandiose beliefs – believing they have special powers or talents, or that they are someone famous
- Psychotic symptoms – not being in touch with reality, and having hallucinations, delusional ideas, or disorganised thinking and speech

These experiences can feel very confusing and frightening, but for some people they can also be enjoyable and the person experiencing them may not even think there is a problem.

What is a hypomanic episode?

A hypomanic episode is a milder form of mania, as the symptoms are less severe and last for a shorter period of time. A hypomanic episode may last only four days, and will not include psychotic symptoms nor cause major impairments in a person's functioning.



What is a depressive episode?

A depressive episode is a period of sustained low mood with changes in thinking and behaviour lasting at least two weeks.

Typical symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling low in mood – sadness, irritability, tearfulness
- Losing interest in things that used to be enjoyable
- Changes to 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 levels and lack of motivation
- Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- Poor concentration and memory problems
- Thinking about suicide

Types of bipolar disorder

There are two main types of bipolar disorder: bipolar I ('bipolar one') and bipolar II ('bipolar two'). The diagnosis is based on the symptoms reported by the young person as well as the observations of others including family, friends or workers.

A person with bipolar I disorder will have experienced at least one manic episode, and often has experienced at least one depressive episode also (although this is not always the case). The diagnosis cannot be made until the person has experienced their first manic episode.

A person with bipolar II disorder will have experienced at least one hypomanic episode, as well as at least one depressive episode.

Getting help for bipolar disorder

Early diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder is important in order to reduce the effect of the illness on a young person's life. Because bipolar disorder usually develops in adolescence, it has the potential to disrupt important developmental milestones like moving out of home, finishing school, and getting a job. It can also disrupt a young person's basic functions, including their sleep, energy and confidence, and make it difficult for them to develop a stable sense of self. Early treatment can reduce the impact of the disorder on a young person's life, reduce the risk of future episodes, and improve the likelihood that treatment will be effective.

Appropriate medication is a key part of treatment for bipolar disorder. The response to medication may be better in young people, who have had the illness for a relatively short time, compared to older people who have long-standing illness.

Psychological interventions, provided as a part of assertive case management, are also important. They can assist the young person to address negative thoughts and feelings, encourage adherence to treatment, manage anxiety, and importantly, identify ways to improve overall health and wellbeing.

Other strategies that can be useful in helping to manage bipolar disorder and stay well include:

- Having regular patterns of sleeping and eating
- Learning to manage stress
- Avoiding alcohol and other drugs
- Maintaining activities and keeping in contact with friends
- Maintaining some level of engagement with education or employment

How you can help

Supporting a young person to find a local doctor (general practitioner – GP) or psychiatrist who can properly assess their mental state is very important. Young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help, so helping them to find someone they trust and feel comfortable with will be beneficial. If they have had a positive experience with a GP in the past it might be helpful to encourage them to contact that person again. You could also assist them to contact their local community health centre or **headspace** centre.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit **headspace.org.au**

Acknowledgements

Black Dog Institute <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au>

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