



Bipolar Disorder

What Is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, affects about 1 percent of the general population. Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric disorder that causes extreme mood swings that range from mania to depression. People with bipolar disorder usually have episodes of mania or hypomania (a milder form of mania), and at different times, episodes of depression, each lasting for a few weeks or more. In between these episodes, the person has few or no symptoms. People with bipolar disorder may also experience other symptoms during these episodes, such as hallucinations or delusions. Symptoms of bipolar disorder can often disrupt work, school, family, and social life.

What Bipolar Disorder Is Not

Bipolar disorder is not simply being moody or having mild mood swings over the course of the day. Episodes of hypomania, mania, or depression may be associated with many factors, including emotional and physiological reactions to life events and circumstances. These mood swings usually develop gradually during several days or weeks, and involve dramatic shifts not only in mood but also changes in overall outlook, behavior, and energy level that last for weeks or months.

The use of certain substances, especially stimulants such as cocaine or methamphetamine, may cause symptoms that mimic, or are similar to, those of bipolar disorder. People who are high on stimulants may appear manic, and when the stimulants wear off, they're quite depressed. Health care professionals must know how to distinguish the symptoms of bipolar disorder from the symptoms of a substance use disorder.

In addition, antidepressant medications can cause manic or hypomanic symptoms in people who are taking these medications for depression or anxiety disorders. This is not bipolar disorder. If these symptoms occur in someone taking antidepressants, the prescriber should be contacted immediately to adjust the dosage or stop the medication.

What Are the Primary Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder?

The episodes of bipolar disorder include depression, mania, and a state with “mixed features” that includes symptoms associated with each extreme.

Mania:

- euphoric; irritable mood or anger
- decreased need for sleep
- increased goal-directed behavior, such as work, school, or exercise
- agitation
- overconfidence
- grandiosity (unrealistic beliefs of having skills, attributes, power, or money that one doesn't actually have)
- irresponsible spending of money
- rapid speech
- increased sexual drive
- distractedness

Depression:

- hopelessness, sadness, discouragement, or emptiness
- loss of interest in hobbies and regular activities
- significant weight change (increase or decrease of 5 percent of body weight in one month)
- excessive sleeping or having difficulty sleeping
- restlessness or sluggishness, with slow speech or body movements
- extreme fatigue; feeling too physically drained to complete even small tasks
- worthlessness, guilt, or constant self-criticism
- inability to concentrate or focus
- extreme irritability and frustration
- body aches, joint pain, and other physical ailments
- persistent thoughts of death or suicide

Mixed state:

- symptoms of mania and depression occur at the same time

What Is the Cause of Bipolar Disorder?

The exact cause of bipolar disorder is unknown, but it is believed that biological, genetic, and environmental factors contribute to its onset.

What Are the Usual Treatments for Bipolar Disorder?

The recurring mood cycles of bipolar disorder require a comprehensive treatment plan that focuses on the immediate, acute crises of mania or depression, as well as on long-term preventative care. Treatment for bipolar disorder that combines medication with therapy and rehabilitation is often the best strategy for recovery. In addition, family programs designed to teach patients and their relatives about the disorder, how to manage it, and how to reduce stress and conflict are very helpful.

Because of the nature of bipolar disorder, there are two stages of treatment: the acute stage and the maintenance stage.

- **Acute stage:** The primary goal of this stage is to reduce or eliminate severe manic or depressive symptoms of bipolar disorder. This may be accomplished with medication, electroconvulsive therapy, hospitalization, and psychotherapy. The most effective medications for bipolar disorder are lithium, anticonvulsant medications, antipsychotic medications, and antidepressants. Of these, mood stabilizers such as lithium, valproic acid, and divalproate are the most common medications used to treat bipolar disorder.
- **Maintenance stage:** The primary goals of this stage are to maintain a stable mood to prevent future episodes of mania or depression, and to foster recovery in areas such as social relationships, self-care, and work or school. This may be accomplished with medication, therapy, rehabilitation, education, and support. Therapy options may include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy, and family psychoeducation. People may also benefit from individual case management and rehabilitation programs such as supported employment. Continued use of medication, even when no symptoms are present, can help prevent future episodes. In addition, knowing more about the disorder and what triggers a relapse in symptoms can help in avoiding problems and coping with setbacks. Developing a solid support system or attending a support group can also have long-lasting, positive effects on recovery.

How Does the Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs Affect Bipolar Disorder?

About 50 percent of people with bipolar disorder have a co-occurring substance use disorder. The use of alcohol or other substances complicates the symptoms of bipolar disorder. Those with a co-occurring substance use disorder experience more intense and frequent mood swings and are hospitalized more frequently than those without a substance use

disorder. People with bipolar disorder may use drugs for reasons similar to anyone else: to cope with unpleasant feelings, to fit in when socializing with others, or just because it feels good. Many people with bipolar disorder try to self-regulate their mood swings by using alcohol or other drugs, but these efforts invariably fail in the long term. Sometimes, during the manic phase of bipolar disorder, a person is drawn to stimulating environments such as bars, casinos, and parties. This can have disastrous consequences: worsening symptoms of bipolar disorder, increased substance use, and financial, legal, or relationship problems.

How Does Bipolar Disorder Affect Addiction Treatment and Recovery?

A person who is actively using substances or who has just recently discontinued use may not be easily diagnosed with bipolar disorder by a health care professional. Many of the symptoms of bipolar disorder can be confused with the effects of the substances or withdrawal symptoms—and vice versa. Thus, one common problem for people in addiction treatment is that their bipolar disorder is not recognized or diagnosed, whereas another common problem is that they are diagnosed with bipolar disorder when they do not have it.

Bipolar disorder complicates addiction treatment and recovery. During the depressed phase, people are at an increased risk for relapse to substance use because of their profound negative mood, and they may even become suicidal. During the manic phase, people may underestimate the risks associated with certain behaviors, such as going to a party where there will be drug use. They may become overconfident that they can “control” their use of substances without falling back into addiction.

Treatment for Co-occurring Bipolar and Substance Use Disorders

The symptoms of bipolar disorder can worsen substance use, and severe addiction can worsen bipolar disorder. Therefore, the most effective treatment for co-occurring bipolar and substance use disorders is integrated treatment. This means that both disorders are treated at the same time by the same clinician or team of clinicians. Integrated treatment involves a combination of medications, skill-based therapies such as CBT, family and work support, and adequate treatment of the substance use disorder. Since medications are essential for the treatment of bipolar disorder, ongoing and close monitoring of medication adherence, symptoms, and early warning signs of relapse is important. Although

bipolar and substance use disorders can affect a broad range of functioning, effective integrated treatment allows many people to live rewarding and highly productive lives. People with bipolar disorder can benefit from attending peer support groups, and they also can benefit from connecting with others who have these co-occurring disorders and are in recovery.

Resources

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