

Recognizing the signs of bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder is a treatable serious mental illness. It can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, mood and overall functioning. Formerly known as manic-depression, bipolar disorder is marked by dramatic shifts in mood, energy and activity levels. People with this disorder typically swing between intense episodes of mania and depression.

Risk factors

Bipolar disorder affects 2.6 percent of American adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The first symptoms typically appear in the late teens or early adult years, though some people may develop the disorder in childhood or later in life. Researchers are still exploring the causes of the disease, but they believe that both genetic and environmental factors are responsible. Children who have a parent or sibling with bipolar disorder have an elevated risk of developing the disease. Still, most people with a family history will not develop the disease.

Signs and symptoms

Common signs of a manic state:

- Feeling extremely happy.
- Talking faster than is normal.
- Feeling agitated.
- Overconfidence.
- Decreased sleep.
- Irritability.
- Racing thoughts.
- Behaving impulsively.
- Engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as reckless driving, gambling or excessive spending.

Signs of a depressive state:

- Feeling sad or hopeless.
- Irritability.
- Low self-esteem.
- Abandoning favorite activities.
- Having difficulty concentrating or remembering.
- Experiencing unusual sleep habits such as sleeping too much or too little.
- Thinking about death or suicide.

How psychologists can help

With treatment and through their own efforts, people with bipolar disorder can live rich, rewarding lives. Treatment for bipolar disorder usually includes a variety of strategies to manage the disease over the long term. Medications are typically an important part of treatment. Those medications may include mood stabilizers, antipsychotic medications or antidepressants. Such medications usually need to be taken daily and regularly to be effective.

Psychotherapy, too, is often an important part of treatment. In fact, in a recent report prepared for

the Canadian Psychological Association, researchers reviewed numerous studies of bipolar disorder treatment and found that when psychotherapy is used in conjunction with medication, it can significantly reduce rates of relapsing into manic and depressive states, and also improve overall functioning and well-being (*Canadian Psychology*, 2013). Psychologists can help people with bipolar disorder recognize and manage symptoms of the disease, change negative thought patterns and behaviors, manage daily routines and improve relationships with family and friends. And psychologist-led interventions such as family-focused treatments can also help the relatives of people with bipolar disorder learn strategies for helping their loved one. To find a psychologist in your area, use APA's [Psychologist Locator](#) Service.

Being diagnosed with bipolar disorder may come as a shock. But the disease is treatable, and a psychologist can help you manage the disease to live a full and fulfilling life.

Additional Resources

APA: [How to Help in an Emotional Crisis](#).

Facts about [bipolar disorder](#) from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Hunsley, J., Elliott, K., and Therrien, Z. 2014. The efficacy and effectiveness of psychological treatments for mood, anxiety, and related disorders. *Canadian Psychology* 55(3), 161-176.

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