

BIPOLAR DISORDER: AT-A-GLANCE

ABOUT THE DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness characterized by recurring episodes of mania and depression that typically last from weeks to months. As many as 10 million Americans are affected by bipolar disorder.

The symptoms of the illness are far more severe and distinct from the typical ups and downs that most people experience at one time or another. They include profound shifts in thought, mood, energy, sleep, appetite, and behavior. Individuals with bipolar I disorder may experience psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations and delusions, that are typically congruent with their mood state. Thus, when manic, a person might believe that he has super powers or is a religious prophet. When depressed, a person might hear voices severely criticizing him.

Although classic descriptions of bipolar disorder suggest that between relapses of depression and mania, there are periods of well-being, it is unfortunately the case that many individuals affected by this disorder have serious residual symptoms (often of depression) between full relapses.

DIAGNOSIS

Bipolar disorder often emerges between the late teens and early thirties. Although the illness can occur at any point in life, at least half of all cases start before age 25.

Bipolar disorder is not easy to spot when it starts because of its irregular patterns. Some people suffer for years before they are properly diagnosed and treated. There is no simple diagnostic test for the illness.

TREATMENT

Treatment currently focuses on managing symptoms. Treatments typically include medication, psychotherapy, education, self-management strategies, and external support from family, friends, and formal support groups.

Drugs used to treat bipolar disorder typically include mood-stabilizing drugs, such as lithium or an anticonvulsant drug such as valproate, and often, a second-generation antipsychotic drug.

CAUSES

Bipolar disorder is highly influenced by genes, but brain development and environmental risk factors also play a role. Bipolar I patients with psychotic symptoms may exhibit thinning of the cerebral cortex, although to a lesser extent than is observed in schizophrenia.

The material above is collected from the following sources:

- National Institute of Mental Health ([website](#), [PDF on adults](#), [PDF on children](#))
 - National Alliance on Mental Illness ([website](#), [fact sheet](#))
 - Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, formerly NARSAD ([website](#))
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