

What is Bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder (sometimes called manic-depression) is an illness, a medical condition. It affects the normal functioning of the brain, so that the person experiences extreme moods — very high and over-excited or very low and depressed. The person may be affected so much that he or she experiences the symptoms of psychosis, and is unable to distinguish what is real. See SANE Factsheet 1: Psychosis. The symptoms generally react well to treatment, and most people with bipolar disorder recover well from episodes of the illness.

What are the symptoms?

People with bipolar disorder can become high, over-excited and reckless, or imagine that they are more important or influential than they are in real life. They can also become extremely low, feeling helpless and depressed, with difficulty making decisions or concentrating.

Some people mainly experience highs. Some experience mainly lows, and some experience both extremes — becoming profoundly depressed or over-excited. The person may then behave in an uncharacteristically irrational or risky manner.

What causes Bipolar disorder?

The causes of bipolar disorder are not fully understood.

As with any other illnesses, they are likely to be a combination of hereditary and other causes, but a genetic predisposition to develop the illness has been clearly established by scientists.

How many people develop Bipolar disorder?

Up to two in a hundred people will develop bipolar disorder at some time in their lives.

How is Bipolar disorder treated?

Treatment can do much to reduce and even eliminate the symptoms. Treatment should generally include a combination of medication and community support. Both are usually essential for the best outcome.

⤷ Medication

Certain medications assist the brain to restore its usual chemical balance and help control the mood swings and depression. The symptoms of bipolar disorder generally react well to medication.

⤷ Community support programs

This support should include information; accommodation; help with finding suitable work, training and education; psychosocial rehabilitation and mutual support groups. Understanding and acceptance by the community is also very important.

How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns you have. SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness. For more information about this topic see:

⤷ SANE Guide to Bipolar Disorder

Helps people diagnosed with bipolar disorder and their family and friends by explaining what it means to have this diagnosis, examining effective treatments and what family and friends can do to help.

⤷ Bipolar Disorder DVD Kit (Includes a 40 minute DVD and The SANE Guide to Bipolar Disorder)

People who've experienced bipolar disorder and their carers talk about the things which have helped them cope better. See above for details on the SANE Guide included.

⤷ SANE Guide to Medication and other Treatments

Explains how all the different aspects of treatment work, by looking at clinical care, medication, support in the community and helping yourself.

⤷ Broken Open by Craig Hamilton

ABC broadcaster tells what it is like to develop a mental illness in the public eye. He explores how his experience and diagnosis of bipolar disorder affected his family, work colleagues and friends.

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