

Bipolar – understanding this mental disorder



Bipolar disorder is a personality disorder that can cause unusual and dramatic shifts in a person's mood. Moods can alternate from one extreme, depression, to the other extreme, euphoria. This instability can disrupt work and family life. It is not certain what causes these mood shifts, but bipolar can be effectively managed with medication and therapy.

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar is very different from the normal ups and downs we all feel from day to day. The symptoms of bipolar disorder can be severe and disrupting, and without treatment, the ability to function normally and lead a productive life is diminished. Left untreated, it could cause significant distress in the lives of those affected, including their family and friends.

Most sufferers start having symptoms during their teens or early adulthood, but children can also display signs of it. It usually persists throughout life, but if diagnosed correctly, can be treated effectively.

Symptoms

Bipolar disorder is difficult to diagnose, for a number of reasons. For example, the symptoms may be similar to those of other illnesses such as schizophrenia, or attributed to other problems such as substance abuse or strained interpersonal relationships.

People with bipolar disorder sometimes self-medicate by using alcohol and drugs, making the symptoms less obvious. The manic symptoms may cause a person to feel so good that they deny there is a problem. Typically, the illness is characterised by alternating depression and manic episodes, with periods of 'normal' behaviour in between. However, for many sufferers, periods of depression occur more often.

Types of bipolar disorder

The classic form of the illness involves recurrent episodes of mania and depression. This is called **bipolar I disorder**.

Hypomania that alternates with depression is called **bipolar II disorder**. Four or more episodes of illness occurring within a 12-month period is called **rapid-cycling bipolar disorder**.

Some people experience multiple episodes within a single week, or even a single day. Rapid cycling tends to develop later on during the course of illness and is more common among women.

Top four myths about bipolar disorder

- **People with bipolar disorder can't get better or lead a normal life.**
- **All people with bipolar disorder swing back and forth between mania and depression.**
- **Bipolar disorder only affects mood.**
- **Aside from taking medication, there is nothing you can do to control bipolar disorder.**

Treatment

Bipolar disorder is treatable. In fact, with treatment, most people with the disorder are able to live full and productive lives. As this is a recurrent disorder, treatment is more effective when it's continued long-term, with no breaks. Research suggests that the optimal treatment is a combination of medication and psychotherapy.

While medication is the foundation of bipolar disorder treatment, therapy and self-help strategies also play important roles. You can help control your symptoms by exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, eating right, monitoring your moods, keeping stress to a minimum, and surrounding yourself with supportive people.



Some people respond to treatment quickly and stabilise soon after starting. Others take longer and might even have to try different medications or combinations of treatment before they feel better. Don't lose hope if you, or a loved one, face treatment challenges. It's just a matter of finding what will work.

What can you do to support someone with bipolar?

The support of co-workers plays an important role in bipolar treatment and recovery. If someone close to you has this disorder, you can make an enormous difference by helping that person find the right treatment, obtain benefits, and cope with symptoms.

You can also play a crucial role by encouraging your colleague and offering support as they embark on the journey to achieving a good quality of life.

If someone close to you has bipolar, you may be struggling with any number of difficult emotions, including fear, guilt, anger, frustration, and hopelessness. The illness may be difficult for you to accept - you may feel helpless in the face of their symptoms or you may be worried or confused by strange behaviours you don't understand.

How can you cope if a colleague has bipolar?

- **Separate the person from the disorder.**

You can respect the person, even if you disrespect the disorder. Also, separate medication side effects from the disorder/person.

- **It may be necessary to revise your expectations.**

Acknowledge the remarkable courage your colleague may show dealing with a mental disorder and endeavour to support them through it.

- **Accept 'strange behaviour'.**

This is a symptom of the disorder, so try not to take it personally or be intimidated by it.

- **Set boundaries.**

You have a right to ensure your personal safety. It is important to have boundaries and set clear limits.

- **Educate yourself.**

Learning about bipolar and its treatment will allow you to gain important insights into the daily struggle of someone diagnosed with the disorder.

- **Reduce stress where possible.**

Stress can cause bipolar symptoms to flare up, so it's important to create a structured and supportive environment for your co-worker. Avoid putting excess pressure on them or criticising perceived shortcomings.

- **Empower your co-worker.**

Be careful that you're not taking over and doing things for them that they are capable of doing themselves. Try to support your colleague while still encouraging as much independence as possible.



Recognising that a person has limited capabilities should not mean that you expect nothing of them.

Keep a positive outlook and make sure you turn to fellow co-workers if you need help coping with a situation.