

Bipolar disorder

Information for adults



FACT SHEET 16

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder which involves significant periods of both low (depressed) and high or excited (manic) mood states. It is the presence of a manic episode at some stage that distinguishes it from other mood disorders. Previously referred to as manic-depressive illness, bipolar disorder affects approximately 2 per cent of the population.¹

WHAT CAUSES BIPOLAR DISORDER?

As with other mental illnesses, a combination of factors is believed to trigger bipolar disorder. These include a family history of bipolar disorder, stressful life events and the use of illicit drugs.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BIPOLAR DISORDER

If you, a friend or a family member is experiencing the symptoms listed below, it's important to ensure that the person is seen by a doctor or mental health professional. The symptoms may indicate a possible manic episode of bipolar disorder. Most people with bipolar disorder experience depression for weeks to months, with manic periods lasting up to three months or longer.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNISE A MANIC STATE?

- Increased energy
- Irritability
- Overactivity
- Increased spending
- Increased sex drive
- Racing thoughts
- Rapid speech
- Decreased sleep
- Grandiose ideas
- Hallucinations and/or delusions

"My brain has gone at a thousand miles an hour. I've had periods in my life when I virtually couldn't sleep at night... because my brain was going mad. Not mad, it was creative. Millions of thoughts, millions of ideas."

HOW DO YOU RECOGNISE A DEPRESSED STATE?

The symptoms of a depressed state are the same as those for people who become depressed but do not have bipolar disorder.

- Low mood
- Irritability
- Loss or change of appetite
- Lack of motivation
- Low self-esteem
- Sleep disturbance
- Suicidal thoughts
- Difficulty managing small tasks or making simple decisions

"I was suicidal, withdrawn, isolated, hating the world, thinking everyone hated me."

HOW IS BIPOLAR DISORDER TREATED?

A combination of medical and psychological treatments is used to treat bipolar disorder. Everyone is different, however the evidence shows that medication plays an important role in treatment in most cases. The most important thing is to receive a treatment that works for you. Your doctor can help with this.

MEDICATION

A mood stabiliser such as lithium, or other newer agents, is often used in the treatment of a manic episode and to prevent future episodes. Major tranquilisers may also be used to treat the manic episode. Antidepressant medication may be used to treat depression, usually in conjunction with a mood stabiliser.

PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES

Psychological therapies such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) are used to help manage symptoms of a depressive state and manic state, to improve the person's ability to deal with stressful life events and make he/she less vulnerable to manic episodes.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). *2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results* (4326.0). Canberra: ABS.

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HOW CAN YOU MANAGE YOUR ILLNESS?

- Educate yourself about the illness and its treatment.
- Talk to other people living with this illness or read their stories. Learn what works for them and how this may help you.
- Find a therapist you trust to help you work through issues.
- Learn to recognise the early warning signs of an impending relapse. Have a plan developed in conjunction with your GP/psychiatrist and/or mental health worker to enact should a relapse occur. If you recognise the signs and seek help early enough, you may be able to avoid a full relapse.
- Ask a trusted friend to help you. This person can advise you to seek help when your mental state is deteriorating. People with bipolar disorder may lose insight as their condition worsens.
- Draw on support from family and friends. Encourage them to find out more about the illness.
- Take medication as prescribed. When people feel well it can be tempting to stop medication. Stopping mood stabilisers suddenly commonly leads to an episode of mania.
- If your medication doesn't seem to be working, talk to your doctor. It may be possible to alter the dose or try a different type of medication altogether.
- Exercise regularly.
- Establish a regular sleeping pattern.
- Avoid artificial stimulants and depressants such as coffee, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.

HOW CAN YOU HELP SOMEONE WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER?



- Let the person know you've noticed a change in their behaviour.
- Suggest the person seeks help from a health professional.
- Encourage the person to take their medicine as prescribed by the doctor and keep appointments.
- Be aware of the warning signs of an impending mood swing. Encourage the person to see their doctor as soon as possible. If you are a close friend or family member, you could go with the person to see the doctor.
- Help the person make plans in advance to limit some of the damage that can be done during a manic episode. For example, when the person is well, make an agreement to withhold their credit cards during a manic episode.
- Educate yourself about the illness.
- Look after yourself. Seek support for your own needs by joining a support group, keeping in touch with your family doctor and taking time out. By keeping yourself physically and mentally healthy, you will be better equipped to support the person with the illness.



GETTING HELP FOR YOURSELF OR OTHERS

What to do in a mental health emergency

If you or someone you care about is in crisis and you feel immediate action is needed, you can contact the services listed below and they will be able to assist you.

- Call the Emergency Mental Health number available in your area. For contact details call your local hospital or health service provider
- Ambulance: 000
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 (up to the age of 18) (free call, 24 hours)
- Accident and Emergency department of your local hospital
- Emergency appointment with your local general practitioner. Check the White Pages for the phone number.

FAMILY DOCTOR

Visiting your doctor is often a good first step in getting help for a physical or mental health problem. Some doctors may manage your mental health themselves, while others may refer you to a specialist such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

It's not uncommon for bipolar disorder to be misdiagnosed, for example as depression only, alcohol or drug abuse, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or schizophrenia.

That's why it's helpful to make it clear to the doctor or counsellor that you are experiencing highs and lows. You may also find it helpful to write down what you want to say to the doctor before the appointment.

PSYCHIATRISTS

Psychiatrists are doctors who have specialised in mental health. They can make medical as well as psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Typically, psychiatrists use psychological treatments such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or Interpersonal Therapy alongside medication.

PSYCHOLOGISTS

Psychologists are health professionals who provide psychological therapy (psychotherapy) in the treatment of mental illness or distress. Common types of psychotherapy are Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). These are generally known as 'talking therapies'.

SOCIAL WORKERS AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS IN MENTAL HEALTH

Social Workers in Mental Health may assist people with psychological problems by focusing on both the individual and his/her environment.

Occupational Therapists in Mental Health assist people with mental health problems through a focus on independent living.

Treatments provided by both Social Workers and Occupational Therapists in Mental Health include CBT, relaxation strategies, skills training (including problem solving, anger management and stress management) and IPT.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Manic episodes usually require expert input from a mental health specialist and the person may require admission to hospital.

WHEN DO YOU NEED TO GO TO HOSPITAL?

Occasionally a person will need to go to hospital for treatment if they:

- Have severe symptoms
- Have complicated medical problems
- Are in danger of harming themselves or someone else
- Need specific treatments.

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MORE INFORMATION

Telephone-based services:

A number of telephone help lines are available to assist you and provide information.

beyondblue info line

1300 22 4636

Lifeline

13 11 14

SANE Helpline

1800 187 263 (Monday – Friday, 9am to 5pm EST)

Carers Australia

1800 242 636

Mensline Australia

1300 78 99 78 (7 days, 24 hours)

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Web-based services:

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

www.beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

Mental Health Council of Australia

www.mhca.com.au

MoodGYM

www.moodgym.anu.au

blueVoices

blueVoices is a *beyondblue* reference group made up of people who have either cared for someone with depression or a related disorder or experienced the illness themselves. blueVoices has a subgroup which focuses on the needs and experiences of people with bipolar disorder.

For more information on blueVoices and their activities visit www.beyondblue.org.au and click on Getting Involved then National Reference Group blueVoices or email bluevoices@beyondblue.org.au

For more information on caring for someone with depression, anxiety and/or a related disorder, see the *beyondblue Guide for Carers – Caring for others, caring for yourself* – available to order at www.beyondblue.org.au or by calling the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**.

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