



Bipolar Disorder Awareness

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Picture ref: dynamicyou.org

Bipolar disorder is a complex condition that is little known about and surrounds a lot of stigma for the patients who suffer from it. In the UK about 1/100 adults have bipolar disorder at some point in their life. It usually starts between the ages of 15 to 19. It rarely starts after the age of 40. Men and women are **equally** affected.

Bipolar disorder affects a person's mood, which can swing from one extreme to the other, with someone suffering from the disorder having episodes of **depression or mania** that last a few weeks to months. So far we don't know what causes Bipolar Disorder. There is a theory that it might run in families - it seems to have more to do with **genes** than with upbringing. There may be a physical problem with the brain systems which control our moods - this is why bipolar disorder can often be controlled with medication. But, mood swings can be brought on by stressful experiences or physical illness.

People can often not recognise the signs of bipolar. In clinical depression or bipolar disorder, the feeling of depression is more extreme.

It goes on for longer and makes it difficult or impossible to deal with the normal things of life.

If you become depressed, you will notice some of these changes:

- feelings of unhappiness that don't go away
- losing interest in things
- can't think positively or hopefully
- difficulty in concentrating.
- increase or loss in appetite and weight
- difficulty in getting to sleep
- going off sex
- crying a lot – or feeling like you want to cry, but not being able to
- avoiding contact with other people.

In bipolar, patients can get episodes of mania - this is when you have an intense sense of well-being, energy and optimism. It can be so strong that it affects your thinking and judgement. You may believe strange things about yourself, make **bad decisions**, and behave in embarrassing, harmful and - occasionally - dangerous ways. Mania can badly affect both your relationships and your work. When it isn't so extreme, it is called 'hypomania'.

If you become manic, you may notice that you are:

- irritated with other people who don't share your optimistic outlook
- feeling more important than usual and be full of new ideas
- unable or unwilling to sleep
- more interested in sex, reckless, and less inhibited in general
- making odd decisions on the spur of the moment, sometimes with disastrous consequences
- recklessly spending your money

There are several medications to help **stabilise** mood such as Lithium, Carbamazepine and Lamotrigine which are effective for some people. Antipsychotic medications such as Olanzapine or Quetiapine also provide a lot of benefit. Women or couples who are planning a baby need careful advice and care by the GP, obstetrician and psychiatrist.

Mania or depression can be very distressing and in some cases the person themselves might not be fully aware of the extent of their symptoms and so it is important that family, friends and work colleagues can recognise the signs and **offer support**.

The Bipolar UK website www.bipolaruk.org, provides advice and information for patients, friends and carers.

There are also now **excellent apps** available that are free to use and can help your GP/ Psychiatrist monitor your symptoms and treatment. The best is Mood Log App and Bipolar Disorder Connect App.