

Bipolar Disorder: Understanding Bipolar Disorder

If you have just been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, you might feel frightened right now. The future may seem terribly uncertain. What will this mean for your life, your family, and your job?

But getting diagnosed is actually good news. It means you can finally get the treatment you need. People with bipolar disorder usually go about 10 years before being accurately diagnosed.

Treatment can make a huge difference. With a combination of things -- good medical care, medication, talk therapy, lifestyle changes, and the support of friends and family -- you can feel better. Bipolar disorder -- or manic depression, as it used to be called -- may not have a cure. But plenty of people with this condition do well; they have families and jobs and live normal lives.

What Is It?

There are two major types of bipolar disorder.

- **Type I** causes periods of **mania** often alternating with periods of **depression**. These periods might last for weeks or months.
- **Type II** causes periods of depression that alternate with a less severe form of mania called **hypomania**.

There are other kinds of bipolar disorder. Cyclothymia is characterized by frequent but milder changes in your mood. Rapid cycling is a term used to describe cases of bipolar I or II, in which intense mood changes happen quickly, sometimes within months, weeks, or days.

But whatever type of bipolar disorder you have, there is a still lot of variation from person to person. While some people are beset with frequent serious mood swings, others go years or even decades before having another. Everyone's experience is different.

Why Me?

Bipolar disorder can make you feel utterly alone. But that really isn't the case. More than 2 million adults in the U.S. are coping with it right now.

It's important not to blame yourself for your condition. Bipolar disorder is a physical illness, not a sign of personal weakness. It's like diabetes, heart disease, or any other health condition.

The important thing is to focus on the future. Living with bipolar disorder can be tough. But don't let it hijack your life. Instead, take action and regain control of your health. With dedication and the help of your health-care providers, you can feel better again.

Edited by Charlotte E. Grayson, MD, WebMD, March 2005.

SOURCES: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth edition, Text Revision. Washington, D. C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000. The Nations Voice on Mental Illness. Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA). American Psychiatric Association. National Institute of Mental Health. Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients with Bipolar Disorder, 2002. WebMD Medical Reference in collaboration with The Cleveland Clinic: Bipolar Disorder. Muller-Oerlinghausen, B. The Lancet, Jan. 19, 2002; vol 359: pp 241-247. Kaufman, K. Annals of Clinical Psychiatry. June, 2003; vol 15: pp 81-83. Compton, M. Depression and Bipolar Disorder, ACP Medicine.