

Let's talk about...

Bipolar Disorder

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

WE ALL KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO EXPERIENCE MOOD SWINGS—ALTERNATING BETWEEN FEELING GOOD AND FEELING SAD. SOME PEOPLE EXPERIENCE SEVERE SHIFTS IN MOODS WHERE THEY SUFFER PERIODS OF SERIOUS DEPRESSION FOLLOWED BY EPISODES OF FEELING “HIGH” OR PERHAPS IRRITABLE. THESE MOOD SWINGS ARE NOT NECESSARILY RELATED TO EVENTS IN THE PERSON’S LIFE. BIPO-LAR DISORDER AFFECTS APPROXIMATELY 1% OF THE CANADIAN POPULATION. SOME WELL KNOWN PEOPLE WHO HAVE SUFFERED FROM BIOPOLAR DIS-ORDER INCLUDE:

•LUDWIG VON BEETHOVEN •ERNEST HEMINGWAY
•VINCENT VAN GOGH •PATTI DUKE •CARRIE FISHER •MARGARET TRUDEAU

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in a person’s mood, energy, and ability to function. The periods of highs and lows are called episodes of mania and depression. It may be helpful to think of the various mood states in bipolar disorder as a spectrum or continuous range. At one end is severe depression, above which is moderate depression, and then mild low mood, which many people call “the blues.” Then there is a normal or balanced mood, above which comes hypomania (mild to moderate mania – see symptoms listed below), and then severe mania.

Bipolar disorder may appear to be a problem other than mental illness—for instance, alcohol or drug abuse, poor school or work performance, or strained interpersonal relationships. Such problems may in fact be signs of an underlying mood disorder.

This particular disorder typically starts in late adolescence or early adulthood, and affects men and women equally.

SYMPTOMS

In the **depression phase**, symptoms may include:

- Feeling sad, discouraged, hopeless, empty

- Eating is a big effort and you lose a lot of weight, or eating all the time with significant weight gain
- Feel like sleeping all the time
- Daily activities are an enormous effort (e.g. taking care of one’s self or family)
- Thinking life will never get better
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions
- Thoughts of harming yourself or suicide

In the **manic phase**, symptoms may include:

- Feelings of euphoria, extreme optimism, exaggerated self-esteem
- Rapid speech, racing thoughts
- Decreased need for sleep
- Extreme irritability, denial that anything is wrong
- Impulsive and potentially reckless behaviour, such as spending sprees
- Abuse of drugs, particularly cocaine, alcohol, and sleeping medications
- Increased sexual drive

TREATMENT

People with bipolar disorder can lead healthy and productive lives when the illness is effectively treated. Most people with bipolar disorder—even those with the most severe forms—can achieve substantial stabilization of their mood swings and related symptoms. Without treatment, however, the disorder tends to worsen.

Because bipolar is a recurrent illness, long-term preventive treatment is strongly recommended. A strategy that combines medication and psychosocial treatment is optimal for managing the disorder over time. The illness is much better controlled if treatment is continuous rather than on and off. Even then, mood changes can occur and should be reported immediately to one’s doctor. The doctor may be able to prevent a full-blown episode by making adjustments to the treatment plan.

Recommended Reading: *Bipolar Disorder: The Ultimate Guide*, Sarah Owen, Oneworld Publications



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