



What this Fact Sheet covers:

- What is Bipolar Disorder?
- Distinguishing between Bipolar I and Bipolar II
- The symptoms of Bipolar Disorder
- Key features of mania and hypomania
- When to seek help for Bipolar Disorder

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar Disorder is the name used to describe a set of 'mood swing' conditions, the most severe form of which used to be called 'manic depression'. The term describes the exaggerated swings of mood from one extreme to the other that are characteristic of the illness.

People with this illness suffer recurrent episodes of high, or elevated, mood (*mania* or *hypomania*) and of depression. A very small percentage of sufferers of Bipolar Disorder only experience the 'highs'. Most experience both the highs and the lows. Occasionally people can experience a mixture of both highs and lows at the same time, or switch during the day, giving a *mixed* picture. People with Bipolar Disorder experience normal moods in between their swings.

The mood swings pattern for each individual is generally quite distinct, with some people only having episodes of mania once a decade, while others may have daily mood swings.

Bipolar Disorder can commence in childhood, but onset is commoner in the teens or early 20s. Some people develop their first episode in mid-to-late adulthood.

It is important to note that everyone has mood swings from time to time. It is only when these moods become extreme and interfere with personal and professional life that Bipolar Disorder may be present and medical assessment may be warranted.

Distinguishing between Bipolar I and Bipolar II

Bipolar I Disorder is the more severe disorder - with individuals being more likely to experience mania, have longer 'highs', be more likely to have *psychotic* experiences and be more likely to be hospitalised.

Bipolar II Disorder is defined as being less severe, with no psychotic experiences and with episodes tending to last only hours to a few days; a person experiences episodes of both hypomania and depression but no manic episodes and the severity of the highs does not lead to hospitalisation.

Women and men develop Bipolar I Disorder at equal rates while the rate of Bipolar II is somewhat higher in females.



Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

Accurately diagnosing Bipolar Disorder is often not a straightforward matter. Many people go 10 years or more before their illness is accurately diagnosed as Bipolar Disorder.

There are two starting points for considering whether you might have Bipolar Disorder. Firstly, you must have had episodes of clinical depression. Secondly, you must have had 'highs', where your mood is more 'up' than usual, or where you feel more wired and hyper.

If both depression and 'highs' have been experienced, then the next thing to consider is whether you also experience any of the 6 key features of mania and hypomania. These are described below.

The Black Dog Institute has developed a Self-test for Bipolar Disorder which can help to give you an initial indication of whether you might have Bipolar Disorder. This is available on our website as well as in printed form.

Some people with Bipolar Disorder can become suicidal. It is very important that talk of suicide be taken seriously and for such people to be treated immediately by a mental health professional or other appropriate person.

Key features of mania & hypomania

What is it that separates normal 'happiness' from the euphoria or elevation that is seen in mania and hypomania? Researchers at the Black Dog Institute have identified six key distinguishing features:

- High energy levels
- Positive mood
- Irritability
- Inappropriate behaviour
- Heightened creativity
- Mystical experiences.

More extreme expressions of mania (but not hypomania) may have the added features of delusions and hallucinations.

High energy levels – with the individual feeling 'wired' and 'hyper', extremely energetic, experiencing racing thoughts, talking more and talking over people, making decisions in a flash, being constantly on the go, and feeling less need for sleep.

Positive mood – feeling confident and capable, optimistic, that one can succeed in everything, more creative, more happy and perhaps feeling 'high as a kite'.

Irritability – reflected in irritable, impatient and angry behaviours.

Inappropriate behaviour – becoming over involved in other people's activities, by increased risk taking (i.e: over indulging in alcohol and drugs and



gambling excessively), saying and doing outrageous things, spending more money, having increased libido; dressing more colourfully and with disinhibition.

Heightened creativity – experienced as 'seeing things in a new light', seeing things vividly and with crystal clarity, finding one's senses are heightened and feeling quite capable of writing the 'great Australian novel'.

Mystical experiences – can be experienced by believing that there are special connections between events, that there is a higher rate of coincidence between things happening, feeling one with nature and appreciating the beauty and the world around, believing that things have special significance.

When to seek help for bipolar disorder

If you have experienced an episode of *mania* or *hypomania*, it's best to seek professional help as soon as possible. It may indicate that you have Bipolar Disorder, which, if left untreated, will likely involve further episodes of mania or hypomania. Bipolar Disorder is not an illness which goes away of its own accord but which often needs long-term treatment. Accurately diagnosing Bipolar Disorder is a task for a professional. A first step is to see your local General Practitioner, who will likely refer you to a psychiatrist for assessment and treatment.

Key points to remember:

- Bipolar Disorder is an illness involving exaggerated mood swings from one extreme to the other, involving, usually, alternating periods of depression and mania or hypomania.
- The pattern of mood swings for each individual is quite distinct.
- The 6 key features of mania and hypomania are
 - High energy levels
 - Positive mood
 - Irritability
 - Inappropriate behaviour
 - Heightened creativity
 - Mystical experiences.
- Accurately diagnosing Bipolar Disorder is a task for a skilled mental health practitioner.
- If symptoms of Bipolar Disorder are suspected it's best to first see your General Practitioner who will likely refer you to a psychiatrist.
- People with Bipolar Disorder can become suicidal. Talk of suicide should be taken seriously and immediate help should be sought from a GP or other mental health professional.

Where to get more information:

- National Institute of Mental Health (US): www.nimh.nih.gov.au

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