

A close-up photograph of a young Black man and woman smiling and embracing each other outdoors. The man is on the left, wearing a white t-shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a teal t-shirt. They are both looking towards the right of the frame with joyful expressions.

LIVING WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER

holding your hand through health

WHAT IS BIPOLAR DISORDER?

Bipolar disorder is a mental health disorder¹ that causes a sudden, dramatic shift in the extremes of emotions,² lasting for at least 1-2 weeks and ranging from euphoric,³ impulsive¹ feelings to feeling extremely sad or hopeless.^{1,4} Bipolar disorder is typically diagnosed in teenagers and young adults, aged 20 years or older, but is sometimes seen in younger children.³

The symptoms of bipolar disorder are as follows:^{1,2,3,4}

Mania



- Feelings of superiority, grandiosity and inflated self-esteem
- High energy levels
- Increased activity
- Racing thoughts
- Talking excessively and very fast about a lot of different things
- Short attention span
- Decreased need for sleep
- Inappropriate laughing or joking
- Irritable and agitated or getting into a lot of arguments
- Inappropriate spending sprees or sexual activity
- Think they can do a lot of things, start projects and do not complete any

Depression



- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or inappropriate guilt
- Feeling tired with very little energy
- Decreased activity levels
- Feeling sluggish with no interest and not enjoying anything
- Feeling depressed, sad and worried
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions, being forgetful
- Having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Eating too little or too much with resultant weight loss (without dieting) or weight gain
- Feeling restless or irritated
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide or planning or attempting suicide

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These feelings may change from feeling very good to feeling really sad or depressed a few times a year or as often as several times a week.³ Sometimes extended periods where no extreme emotions are experienced can occur between these episodes of extreme emotion.^{3,4} Sometimes the symptoms of mania and depression can occur at the same time and those are called 'mixed episodes'.⁴

People with bipolar disorder often suffer from other conditions such as anxiety disorders, attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other physical health problems such as thyroid problems, heart conditions or obesity^{3,4}

What causes bipolar disorder?

The exact cause of bipolar disorder is unknown.¹ It is believed that bipolar disorder is not due to a single cause, but instead, several factors appear to play a role.⁴

These contributing factors include:

- **Genetics** – research suggests that people with certain genes are at higher risk of developing bipolar disorder⁴
- **Family history** – children with a parent or sibling who has bipolar disorder are at higher risk of developing bipolar disorder. This is true for about 1 out of 7 children who have one parent with bipolar disorder^{2,4}
- **Biological differences** – some studies in people with bipolar disorder have shown that there are physical differences in the brain and in the way that the brain functions^{3,4}

Some factors may increase the risk of developing bipolar disorder or act as a trigger for the first episode.³ These include:

- Periods of high stress³
- Drug or alcohol abuse³
- Major life changes such as the death of a loved one, losing a job or other traumatic experiences³
- Changes in the seasons²

What is the impact of bipolar disorder?

Untreated bipolar disorder can have an impact on several aspects of the affected person's life including:³

- Relationships with other people
- Marital and family relationships
- Poor performance at school or work
- Frequent absences from school or work
- Financial problems
- Legal problems
- Problems with alcohol and drug abuse

People with bipolar disorder often feel lonely and isolated and are at higher risk of committing or trying to commit suicide.^{1,3}

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In addition to adhering to your treatment, you can also adapt your lifestyle to improve your condition by implementing some or all of the following:

- Maintain a stable sleeping pattern – go to bed around the same time and get up at the same time each morning²



- Maintain a regular pattern of daily activity – manage your time and energy well without driving yourself too hard. Create a daily planning calendar²

- Avoid using alcohol or illicit drugs to try to feel better²



- Improve your diet and avoid caffeine, sugar and heavily-salted food²

- Exercise and take good care of yourself²

- Surround yourself with simple things that make you feel good such as pets, music and hobbies²



- Do exercises to help you relax, reduce stress and focus. Keep your life as calm and peaceful as possible²



- Spend time with positive people and participate in fun, creative activities²



- Allow some time in the outdoors where you can be exposed to light²

- Record your thoughts and feelings in a journal – this will help identify any changes in your mood and will also assist your doctor²



- Join a support group or spend time talking to a friend²

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HOW CAN I SUPPORT A LOVED ONE WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER?

Friends and family members can provide support to patients with bipolar disorder in the following ways:²

- Encourage the patient to continue with treatment and doctors' visits
- Learn about the disorder and warning signs of mood changes to ensure that the patient gets help as soon as it becomes necessary
- While the patient is in a normal state of mind, discuss rules in terms of withholding credit cards, banking privileges and car keys during an episode of mania
- Let patients recover at their own pace after an episode and beware of extremes such as pushing too hard or expecting too little
- Do things with the patient but beware of doing things for them
- Threats and warning signs of suicide should be taken seriously – encourage the patient to speak to the doctor as soon as possible
- Make use of support programs available for patients, family and friends of patients. Have the contact numbers for helplines handy in cases of emergency

- **South African Depression and Anxiety Support Group SADAG – 0800 12 13 14 or 0800 41 42 43**

- **Lifeline Southern Africa - 0861 322 322**



YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Remember, bipolar disorders are treatable. Receiving the correct professional advice as soon as possible will help you on your way to living your life without the heavy burden of a bipolar disorder.

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