

# Bipolar Disorder in Adults



National Institute of Mental Health

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This booklet discusses bipolar disorder in adults. For information on bipolar disorder in children and adolescents, see the NIMH booklet, *Bipolar Disorder in Children and Adolescents*.

## What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out daily tasks. Symptoms of bipolar disorder can be severe. They are different from the normal ups and downs that everyone goes through from time to time. Bipolar disorder symptoms can result in damaged relationships, poor job or school performance, and even suicide. But bipolar disorder can be treated, and people with this illness can lead full and productive lives.



Bipolar disorder often appears in the late teens or early adult years. At least half of all cases start before age 25.<sup>1</sup> Some people have their first symptoms during childhood, while others may develop symptoms late in life.

Bipolar disorder is not easy to spot when it starts. Some people suffer for years before they are properly diagnosed and treated. Like diabetes or heart disease, bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout your life.

## What are the signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder?

People with bipolar disorder experience unusually intense emotional states that occur in distinct periods called “mood episodes.” **Each mood episode represents a drastic change from a person’s usual mood and behavior.** An overly joyful or overexcited state is called a manic episode, and an extremely sad or hopeless state is called a depressive episode. Sometimes, a mood episode includes symptoms of both mania and depression. This is called a mixed state. People with bipolar disorder also may be explosive and irritable during a mood episode. Extreme changes in energy, activity, sleep, and behavior go along with these changes in mood.

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