

## Bipolar Disorder Explained

Generally, human beings have a built-in “cruise control” to help our mood maintain balance between depressed and elevated. Sometimes, we briefly dip into an extremely depressed or elevated mood due to life’s circumstances, but we are usually able to return to equilibrium. For example, after getting engaged, an individual may feel elated however, after some time, this feeling returns to baseline. Similarly, if one suffers a loss, there might be a period of depressed mood, but eventually, emotional regularity returns.

People who have bipolar disorder do not have this built-in system of stability and therefore experience unmanaged and extreme emotions. These episodes can last from a week to several months and are generally book marked by a period of balanced mood.

The extremely elevated mood of bipolar disorder is known as mania. During mania, the person may feel ‘on top of the world’ or uncomfortably irritable and “revved up.” Mania is usually accompanied by the following symptoms:

- Feelings of grandiosity
- Decreased need for sleep
- Excessively talkative
- Racing thoughts
- Attention drawn to irrelevant items
- Increase in goal related activity
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities with drastic consequences (such as unrestrained buying sprees or foolish business investments).

In extreme cases, mania can cause an individual to experience psychosis.

In some cases, the mood is not sufficiently elevated to be called mania and therefore is referred to as hypomania (“hypo” is Greek for “under”). Hypomania has similar symptoms as mania, but they are less severe, briefer in duration, and generally less impairing than actual mania. Mania often requires hospitalization, whereas hypomania usually does not.

Bipolar disorder is broken down into bipolar I and bipolar II. Bipolar I is episodes of major depression and at least one manic episode. Bipolar II is episodes of major depression and at least one episode of hypomania but without ever having a manic episode. There is a third disorder that is called cyclothymic disorder which is periods of elevated and depressed mood just like bipolar disorder, but the mood swings are not as severe and they tend to be more frequent.

These disorders are generally treated with medication alone or a combination of medication and psychotherapy.