

- What are Mental Disorders?
- What is Addiction?
- Depression
- ▶ Bipolar Disorder
- Postpartum Depression
- Seasonal Affective Disorder
- Anxiety Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Eating Disorders and Body Image
- Alzheimer's Disease and Other Forms of Dementia
- Concurrent Disorders: Mental Disorders and Substance Use Problems
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Tobacco
- Suicide: Following the Warning Signs
- Treatments for Mental Disorders
- Alternative Treatments for Mental Disorders
- Treatments for Addictions
- Recovery from Mental Disorders
- Addictions and Relapse Prevention
- Harm Reduction
- Preventing Addictions
- Achieving Positive Mental Health
- Stress
- Mental Disorders and Addictions in the Workplace
- Seniors' Mental Health and Addictions Issues
- Children, Youth and Mental Disorders
- Youth and Substance Use
- Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Mental Health Issue
- Stigma and Discrimination Around Mental Disorders and Addictions
- Cross Cultural Mental Health and Addictions Issues
- Unemployment, Mental Health and Substance Use
- Housing
- Economic Costs of Mental Disorders and Addictions
- Personal Costs of Mental Disorders and Addictions
- The Question of Violence
- Coping with Mental Health Crises and Emergencies
- What Families and Friends Can Do to Help
- Getting Help for Mental Disorders
- Getting Help for Substance Use Problems

Bipolar Disorder

We all experience shifts in our mood: some days we feel happy and ready to take on the world; other days can be discouraging, filled with sadness and frustration. Our emotional state of being varies constantly, and can fluctuate between these two extremes on a daily basis.

Although some fluctuation in mood is normal, when it becomes so extreme that the person feels like their mood state shifts through low and high periods, this can indicate the presence of bipolar disorder.

Symptoms of Depression

- feeling worthless, helpless or hopeless
- sleeping more or less than usual
- eating more or less than usual
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- loss of interest in taking part in activities
- decreased sex drive
- avoiding other people
- overwhelming feelings of sadness or grief
- feeling unreasonably guilty and hopeless
- loss of energy, feeling very tired
- thoughts of death or suicide

Symptoms of Mania

- excessively high, elevated or irritable mood
- unreasonable optimism or poor judgement
- hyperactivity or racing thoughts
- talkativeness, rapid speech (sometimes becoming incoherent)
- decreased sleep
- extremely short attention span
- rapid shifts to rage or sadness

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is a form of clinical depression that affects 1 to 2% of the population in a lifetime or about one in every five people with mood disorders. It does not discriminate among socioeconomic groups and, unlike other kinds of depression, seems to affect men and women equally. What *can* elevate your risk though—by about 7%—is being the close relative of someone with the disorder.

Robert Winram, who has lived with bipolar disorder since he was a young adult, says that for him, receiving the diagnosis was a very important first step. “For 25 years, I had no diagnosis, and didn’t understand what was happening. It was a great relief to finally know what it was,” he says.

The experience of bipolar disorder from person to person depends on how fast the individual moves through periods of depression and mania, how severe each extreme gets, and what else happens during each state (for instance, whether the person is experiencing psychosis, or a break with reality, during mania or depression.)

Despite these differences, an episode of bipolar disorder will feature a person experiencing cycles of moods, including periods of depression, normal mood and mania. Depressive symptoms are similar to those experienced by people undergoing a major depression. During this time, a person can feel a range of bodily symptoms affecting sleep, appetite, concentration and energy levels and a range of psychological symptoms including worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness and apathy.

In contrast, a person in a manic phase may suddenly experience an excessively high or elated mood. They may begin to talk rapidly, have little need for sleep, make grandiose plans and even start to carry them out. Such uncharacteristically risky or ambitious behaviour can sometimes land the person in trouble. For example, someone may spend money very freely and get into debt, or show disregard for the law. They may also show an uncharacteristic lack of judgement in their sexual behaviour. And as already mentioned, some people also have psychosis (e.g. delusions and hallucinations) during this time.

For Robert, the mania would manifest itself as loss of sleep, fatigue, cold sores, and fast speech. “I would become overly busy, impulsive, talkative and take on too many projects,” he says. “Eventually, my thinking became so muddled that I started having delusions and became paranoid that I was seeing signs directed at me. For example, I thought that my neighbours were watching me and that newspaper articles or advertisements had special meanings meant just for me.”

Although the illness can first strike at any age, it is most commonly developed in young adulthood, especially in one’s 20s. Many people with the illness take years to be properly diagnosed because doctors often only see the patient when they are depressed and may fail to ask the right questions to diagnosis bipolar disorder.

Bipolar disorder can take a mild, moderate or severe form depending on the number and intensity of the symptoms. Though people

may struggle with the illness for many years, an episode itself is never permanent, lasting from several days to a number of months. With professional treatment, however, it may end much more quickly.

There are a number of possible causes of bipolar disorder. Biochemical factors are thought to play a large role. Since a person's risk of developing bipolar disorder increases if they have a close relative with the disorder, genes are thought to play an important part too. In addition, stress related to work, relationships, finances and other areas of life can trigger a bipolar episode.

Medications can often help to reduce, if not stop, the extreme mood swings associated with manic depression. Psychological therapy and the support of family, friends, support groups and other self-help strategies can also help people to lead fuller and more active lives.

Robert's diagnosis gave him much insight into his illness and enabled him to seek appropriate treatment. He found effective medication and began to learn how to manage the illness. He recently retired as the Executive Director of the Mood Disorders Association of BC. "I find my work both difficult and empowering, as it teaches me that I am no longer a victim and allows me to use my experiences to reach out to others so that they can begin their own paths to recovery."

SOURCES

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Celebrities with Bipolar Illness

A partial list of public figures who have made public their experiences with manic depression:

- **Alvin Ailey**, choreographer
- **Ned Beatty**, actor
- **Ludwig van Beethoven**, composer
- **Art Buchwald**, writer
- **Robert Campeau**, Canadian real estate magnate
- **Winston Churchill**, former British prime minister
- **Francis Ford Coppola**, director
- **Patricia Cornwell**, writer
- **John Daly**, pro golfer
- **Gaetano Donizetti**, composer
- **Patty Duke**, actress
- **Carrie Fisher**, actress, writer
- **Larry Flynt**, magazine publisher
- **Shecky Greene**, comedian
- **Linda Hamilton**, actress
- **Jack Irons**, musician
- **Margot Kidder**, actress
- **Vivien Leigh**, actress
- **Bill Lichtenstein**, journalist
- **Joshua Logan**, director, playwright
- **Robert Lowell**, poet
- **Kristy McNichol**, actress
- **Burgess Meredith**, actor
- **Spike Milligan**, comedian
- **Robert Munsch**, writer
- **Jaco Pastorius**, musician
- **Jimmy Piersall**, pro baseball player, sportscaster
- **Charley Pride**, musician
- **Axl Rose**, musician
- **Alonzo Spellman**, pro football player
- **James Taylor**, musician
- **Ted Turner**, media mogul
- **Dimitrius Underwood**, pro football player
- **Jean-Claude Van Damme**, actor, martial artist
- **Brian Wilson**, musician
- **Bert Yancey**, pro golfer

Partners:

Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Centre for Addictions Research of BC

FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health Care

Jessie's Hope Society

Mood Disorders Association of BC

For more information call the Mental Health Information Line toll-free in BC at 1-800-661-2121

or email bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca

web: heretohelp.bc.ca