

## Mood Swings vs. Bipolar Disorder

### For Staff

There can be fairly dramatic mood fluctuations in the average person such as noticeable “highs” and “lows” especially during periods of high stress. Mood fluctuations are part of the human experience and can last for several hours or even for a couple of days. But, they are generally less frequent and shorter in duration when they occur in individuals who do not have bipolar disorder. In fact, many individuals can have mood swings and still keep up with daily functioning such as seeing friends, going to the movies, preparing meals, and caring for children. However, when a person has bipolar disorder, the mood swings are so severe that they disrupt one’s daily functioning and often require treatment.

Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic depression) is classified by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as a mental disorder. There are three primary types of bipolar disorder, and all three involve notable changes in mood, energy, and activity levels. These mood changes vary in type from periods of being extremely elated, irritable, or energized (known as manic episodes) to periods of being very sad, indifferent, or hopeless (known as depressive episodes). **Bipolar I Disorder** (DSM-5) is defined by manic episodes that last at least 7 days (or shorter if the individual requires hospitalization) where the symptoms last most of the day, nearly every day. Individuals who are manic might have grandiose ideas such as being invincible, need little sleep but feel rested, feel a pressure to keep on talking, have racing thoughts, get distracted by unimportant environmental stimuli, engage in risky behavior such as making foolish investments, and possibly experience psychosis. Usually, depressive episodes follow, typically lasting at least 2 weeks. **Bipolar II Disorder** is defined by a pattern of hypomanic and depressive episodes, but without the severity of impairment that is typical of manic episodes in Bipolar I Disorder. **Cyclothymic Disorder** (also called Cyclothymia) is defined by periods of hypomanic symptoms and periods of depressive symptoms lasting for at least 2 years (1 year in children and adolescents). However, these hypomanic and depressive symptoms do not meet the diagnostic requirements of a full hypomanic episode nor a depressive episode.

Proper diagnosis and treatment can help people with bipolar disorder lead healthy and active lives. Making a referral for a diagnostic psychiatric evaluation is the first step.