

Mood Swings vs. Bipolar Disorder

For Patients and Families

Everyone experiences mood swings, noticeable highs and lows, especially during periods of high stress. Mood swings are quite normal and it is not uncommon for them to last several hours or even for a couple of days. When these mood swings begin to occur more frequently, lasting for longer periods of time, and interfere with the person's relationships and ability to perform daily functions, the individual should contact their healthcare provider to determine if they may have developed bipolar disorder.

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.

Bipolar disorder involves 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). Individuals who are experiencing a manic episode might have grandiose ideas such as feeling that they are invincible, feel rested after very little sleep, feel a pressure to keep on talking, have racing thoughts, get distracted by unimportant happenings in their environment, and engage in risky behavior such as making foolish investments. Manic episodes are often followed by depressive episodes. Individuals experiencing a depressive episode feel sad or blue most days, have little interest in things that previously brought them pleasure, feel worthless and hopeless, and may have changes in their sleep pattern and their appetite. Additionally, bipolar disorder can involve seeing or hearing things that are not real, which can be upsetting to the individual.

Getting an accurate diagnosis as early as possible and initiating the right treatment can help people with bipolar disorder lead healthy and active lives. Scheduling an appointment with your healthcare provider is the first step.