



Bipolar Disorder: What Does it Feel Like?

Bipolar disorder is an illness that produces dramatic swings in mood (among other symptoms). A person with bipolar disorder will alternate between periods of mania (elevated mood) and periods of depression (feelings of intense sadness). In between these two extremes, a person will have periods of normal mood. To help gain a better understanding of what it feels like, mania and depression are described below.

Mania

Mania is an extreme feeling of well-being, energy and optimism – you feel on top of the world. These feelings, however, can be so intense that you can lose contact with reality. You may find yourself believing strange things about yourself, making bad judgements and behaving in embarrassing, harmful and sometimes even dangerous ways. Mania can make it difficult or impossible to deal with life in an effective way. A period of mania can, if untreated, destroy your relationships and work. In an episode of mania, you may feel:

- Very happy and excited
- Irritated with other people who don't share your optimistic outlook
- Full of energy
- Unable or unwilling to sleep
- Full of new and exciting ideas
- More important than usual

Other people may notice that you are:

- Jumping very quickly from one idea to another
- Making plans that are grandiose and unrealistic
- Very active and moving quickly
- Behaving in a bizarre way
- Speaking very quickly—it can be difficult for others to understand what you are talking about

- Making odd decisions on the spur of the moment, sometimes with disastrous consequences.
- Recklessly spending your money
- Less inhibited about your sexual behaviour

When someone is in the middle of a manic episode for the first time they usually do not realise that there is anything wrong. It is often friends, family or colleagues who first notice that there is a problem. Unfortunately the person may object if anyone tries to point this out as they may not believe they need help. This is quite understandable because people experiencing a manic mood swing often feel better than they ever have done before. The trouble is that this wonderful sense of happiness leads you to become increasingly detached from day-to-day reality. Many people report that when they have recovered from one of these episodes they regret the things that they said and did while they were manic.

Depression

Feelings of sadness are something we all experience from time to time. It's a natural reaction to losses and painful events. With time, these feelings disappear. But for someone with bipolar disorder, a depressive episode can be much more severe. The depression goes on for longer and makes it very difficult to tackle the daily tasks and problems of living. A person experiencing a depressive episode will likely have the mental and physical symptoms listed below. Not everyone who becomes depressed will have all these symptoms, but they will usually have several of them.

Mental Symptoms

- Feelings of unhappiness that don't go away
- Loss of interest in things
- Being unable to enjoy things
- Finding it hard to make even simple decisions

The Mood Disorders Association of Ontario provides support, information and education as a complement to traditional and alternative therapies. MDAO services are not intended as a replacement for other treatment options and encourages individuals to seek treatment by a qualified health professional.

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario (MDAO)

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- Feeling extremely tired
- Feeling restless and agitated
- Loss of self-confidence
- Feeling useless, inadequate and hopeless
- Feeling more irritable than usual
- Thinking of suicide

Physical Symptoms

- Loss of appetite and weight
- Difficulty in getting to sleep
- Waking earlier than usual
- Constipation
- Loss of interest in sex

Medical help, including such things as medications, can greatly aid in managing these “highs and lows” so that a person can live effectively with bipolar disorder. Getting help as early as possible is important to successful management. If you think you may be experiencing these kinds of symptoms, talk with your family and friends about how you’re feeling and see your family doctor or call your local mental health centre. Treatment works.