

Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Family and Friends



This guide provides family, friends, and other caregivers of individuals with bipolar disorder an overview of bipolar disorder, an overview of the recommended treatment and management options, and suggestions for how to be involved in support of their loved one's recovery.

What is bipolar disorder?



Bipolar disorder is a serious mental health condition that causes changes in an individual's mood, thinking, energy, behavior, sleep, and social interactions.^{1,2} Bipolar disorder includes mania or hypomania episodes that alternate with depressive episodes.^{1,2}

Mania is a type of mood episode marked by some combination of elevated, expansive, or irritable mood and increased goal-directed activity or energy lasting at least one week. These symptoms need to be present most of the day, nearly every day, for at least one week, and result in significant impairment or negative consequences (e.g., hospitalization, arrest, psychotic features, harm to others, loss of a job or important relationships).²

Depressive Episodes are marked primarily by depressed mood or a loss of interest or pleasure in activities lasting at least two weeks.²

What are the symptoms?



Although individual experiences may differ, the symptoms of bipolar disorder include three to four of the following:²

Symptoms of Mania

- Inflated self-esteem
- Decreased need for sleep
- More talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
- Flight of ideas or racing thoughts
- Distractibility
- Increase in goal-directed activities (socially, work-related, or sexually) or agitation
- Engaging in risky activities, such as reckless spending or sexual indiscretions

Symptoms of Depressive Episode

- Feeling worthless or inappropriate guilt
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Psychomotor agitation or retardation
- Fatigue
- Decreased ability to concentrate or indecisiveness
- Significant weight loss or increased appetite
- Decreased interest or pleasure in all or nearly all activities
- Recurrent thoughts of death

Note: Hypomania can include the same symptoms as mania but doesn't cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning and doesn't require hospitalization.²

Some individuals with bipolar disorder who have severe manic or depressive symptoms may also have symptoms of psychosis (i.e., have symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions that impair one's concept of reality).²

Bipolar disorder is a lifelong condition and episodes of mania and depression may come and go over time; treatment can help manage symptoms and improve functioning.¹

When do symptoms of bipolar disorder appear?

Bipolar disorder may have an early onset (around 18 years old), mid onset (around 23 years old) or late onset (around 29 years old).¹ Having a family history of bipolar disorder increases the likelihood of developing bipolar disorder, as does exposure to childhood trauma and stressful life events.¹



Are there other symptoms or disorders that occur with bipolar disorder?

Many people with bipolar disorder also have other mental health disorders including:¹

- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Impulse control disorders
- Substance use disorders



Other concerns with bipolar disorder include rapidly cycling mood symptoms and suicide attempts.¹ Previous suicide attempts are a risk factor for future attempts and suicide.³

What treatments are available for bipolar disorder?



Medications:

- Medications can help manage the symptoms of bipolar disorder
- Individuals collaborate with providers and family members to determine the best medication for their symptoms and needs
- Certain medications are not recommended for use in individuals with child-bearing potential due to their side effects

Psychotherapy: Psychotherapy (talk therapy) is a helpful addition to medication for individuals with bipolar disorder.¹ Effective psychotherapies for bipolar disorder include:¹

- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Family therapy
- Interpersonal and social rhythm therapy
- Multi-session psychoeducation

Recovery Support

Recovery:¹

- Is a process of change where individuals challenged by mental health disorders improve their health and wellness, live meaningful lives, and strive to reach their full potential
- Goes beyond symptom management
- Includes making healthy choices, having a safe and stable place to live, having purpose, participating in meaningful activities, and having relationships that provide friendship, love, and hope



Family Support and Education

Caregiver support programs are suggested and may improve outcomes for the individual with bipolar disorder, as well as improve the well-being of the family.¹ Education about bipolar disorder may be helpful to families supporting a loved one who is in recovery.¹



Military Policies

Military policy indicates that a diagnosis of bipolar disorder may be related to retention in military service and fitness for duty.^{1,4} Bipolar disorder is a serious mental health condition that qualifies a family member with special needs for enrollment in the [Exceptional Family Member Program](#), which provides benefits, support, and resources.^{5,6}

Resources



Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical, and psychological services.

- State-side: 800-342-9647
- Overseas: 800-342-9647
- Collect: 484-530-5908

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil>



988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline provides free and confidential support for individuals in crisis. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call or text 988 or <https://988lifeline.org>.



Military/Veterans Crisis Line provides free, confidential support for service members and veterans in crisis. Dial 988, then press 1 or text 838255 to chat live with a counselor.

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>



inTransition offers specialized coaching and assistance for active duty service members, National Guard members, reservists, veterans, and retirees to help them adapt to their transitions between systems of care.

- State-side: 800-424-7877
- Overseas: 800-748-81111 (in Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea only)

<https://www.health.mil/inTransition>

Mental Health Treatment Locators



Military Health System

Military Medical Treatment Facilities:
<https://www.tricare.mil/mtf>

TRICARE: <https://www.tricare.mil/CoveredServices/Mental/GettingMHCare>



Veterans Health Administration

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/bipolar/next-step.asp>

References

- 1 Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense. (2023). *VA/DOD clinical practice guideline for the management of bipolar disorder*. (Version 2.0). <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/bd/index.asp>
- 2 American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>
- 3 Psychological Health Center of Excellence. (2020). *Suicide prevention: Risk factors and warning signs for family members and caregivers*. Defense Health Agency. <https://health.mil/Reference-Center/Publications/2021/05/25/Suicide-Prevention-Risk-Factors-and-Warning-Signs-for-Family-Members-and-Caregivers>
- 4 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. (2020, September 4). *Medical standards for military service: Retention* (DOD Directive 6130.03, Vol. 2). https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/613003_vol02.PDF?ver=vx1spUpNVLcc-0-rov00Sg%3D%3D
- 5 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. (2023, June 23). *The exceptional family member program* (DOD Instruction 1315.19). <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/131519.pdf?ver=0fpA9-w3TokcS-NiFZR9Aw%3D%3D>
- 6 Military One Source. (n.d.). *EFMP - Exceptional Family Member Program*. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/special-needs/efmp/>

Note: This content is derived from the 2023 VA/DOD clinical practice guideline for management of bipolar disorder.



Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense health care providers who use this information are responsible for considering all applicable regulations and policies throughout the course of care and patient education. Created October 2023 by the Psychological Health Center of Excellence.