

A story of bipolar disorder

(manic-depressive illness)



Does this sound like you?

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE • NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

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of Mental Health

Are you feeling really “down” sometimes and really “up” other times? Are these mood changes causing problems at work, school, or home? If yes, you may have **bipolar disorder**, also called **manic-depressive illness**.



James' story:

"I've had times of feeling "down" and sad most of my life. I used to skip school a lot when I felt like this because I just couldn't get out of bed. At first I didn't take these feelings very seriously.

"I also had times when I felt really terrific, like I could do anything. I felt really "wound up" and I didn't need much sleep. Sometimes friends would tell me I was talking too fast. But everyone around me seemed to be going too slow.

"My job was getting more stressful each week, and the "up" and "down" times were coming more often. My wife and friends said that I was acting very different from my usual self. I kept telling them that everything was fine, there was no problem, and to leave me alone.

“Then, all of a sudden, I couldn’t keep it together. I stopped going to work and stayed in bed for days at a time. I felt like my life wasn’t worth living anymore. My wife made an appointment for me to see our family doctor and went with me. The doctor checked me out and then sent me to a psychiatrist, who is an expert in treating the kinds of problems I was having.

“The psychiatrist talked with me about how I’d been feeling and acting over the last six months. We also talked about the fact that my grandfather had serious ups and downs like me. I wasn’t real familiar with “bipolar disorder,” but it sure sounded like what I was going through. It was a great relief to finally know that the ups and downs really were periods of “mania” and “depression” caused by an illness that can be treated.

“For four months now, I’ve been taking a medicine to keep my moods stable and I see my psychiatrist once a month. I also see someone else for “talk” therapy, which helps me learn how to deal with this illness in my everyday life.

“The first several weeks were hard before the medicine and talk therapy started to work. But now, my mood changes are much less severe and don’t happen as often. I’m able to go to work each day, and I’m starting to enjoy things again with my family and friends.”

Many people who have bipolar disorder don’t know they have it. This booklet can help. It tells you about four steps you can take to understand and get help for bipolar disorder.

Four steps to understand and get help for bipolar disorder:

- 1** Look for signs of bipolar disorder.
- 2** Understand that bipolar disorder is a real illness.
- 3** See your doctor. Get a checkup and talk about how you are feeling.
- 4** Get treatment for your bipolar disorder. You can feel better.

Step 1

Look for signs of bipolar disorder.

Read the following lists.

Put a check mark by each sign that sounds like you now or in the past:

Signs of mania (ups)

- I feel like I'm on top of the world.
- I feel powerful. I can do anything I want, nothing can stop me.
- I have lots of energy.
- I don't seem to need much sleep.
- I feel restless all the time.
- I feel really mad.
- I have a lot of sexual energy.

- I can't focus on anything for very long.
- I sometimes can't stop talking and I talk really fast.
- I'm spending lots of money on things I don't need and can't afford.
- Friends tell me that I've been acting differently. They tell me that I'm starting fights, talking louder, and getting more angry.

Signs of depression (downs)

- I am really sad most of the time.
- I don't enjoy doing the things I've always enjoyed doing.
- I don't sleep well at night and am very restless.
- I am always tired. I find it hard to get out of bed.
- I don't feel like eating much.
- I feel like eating all the time.
- I have lots of aches and pains that don't go away.
- I have little to no sexual energy.
- I find it hard to focus and am very forgetful.

- I am mad at everybody and everything.
- I feel upset and fearful, but can't figure out why.
- I don't feel like talking to people.
- I feel like there isn't much point to living, nothing good is going to happen to me.
- I don't like myself very much. I feel bad most of the time.
- I think about death a lot. I even think about how I might kill myself.

Other signs of bipolar disorder

- I go back and forth between feeling really "up" and feeling really "down."
- My ups and downs cause problems at work and at home.

If you checked several boxes in these lists, call your doctor. Take the lists to show your doctor. You may need to get a checkup and find out if you have bipolar disorder.

Step 2

Understand that bipolar disorder is a real illness.

Bipolar disorder is more than the usual ups and downs of life. It is a serious medical illness that involves the brain. The up feelings are called **mania** and the down feelings are called **depression**.

Most people with bipolar disorder go back and forth between mania and depression. Some people have both feelings at the same time, which is called a **mixed** state.

More than 2 million Americans have bipolar disorder. It can happen to anyone, no matter what age you are or where you come from.

What causes bipolar disorder?

You may want to know why you feel these extreme ups and downs. There may be several causes.

- Bipolar disorder may happen because of changes in your brain.
- Bipolar disorder tends to run in families. This means that someone in your family such as a grandparent, parent, aunt, uncle, cousin, sister, or brother may have bipolar disorder.
- Sometimes the cause of bipolar disorder is not clear.

Bipolar disorder is a serious illness, but it can be treated. You can feel better.

Suicide

Sometimes bipolar disorder can cause people to feel like killing themselves.

If you are thinking about killing yourself or know someone who is talking about it, get help:

- Call 911.
- Go to the emergency room of the nearest hospital.
- Call and talk to your doctor now.
- Ask a friend or family member to take you to the hospital or call your doctor.



Step **3**

See your doctor.

Don't wait. Talk to your doctor about how you are feeling. Get a medical check-up to rule out any other illnesses that might be causing your mood changes. Ask your doctor to send you to a **psychiatrist** (a medical doctor trained in helping people with bipolar disorder).

If you don't have a doctor, check your local phone book. Go to the government services pages (they may be blue in color) and look for "health clinics" or "community health centers." Call one near you and ask for help.



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Step 4

Get treatment for your bipolar disorder. You can feel better.

There are two common types of treatment for bipolar disorder: (1) medicine and (2) “talk” therapy. Having both kinds of treatment usually works best. It is important to get help because bipolar disorder can get worse without treatment. Bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that needs to be treated throughout a person’s lifetime.

Medicine

- See the psychiatrist your doctor suggests. He or she can prescribe medicines that work to control your moods. These medicines are called **“mood stabilizers.”** You also may need to take other medicines to help treat your illness.

- The medicines may take a few weeks to work. Be sure to tell your psychiatrist how you are feeling. If you are not feeling better, you may need to try different medicines to find out what works best for you.
- Medicines sometimes cause unwanted “side effects.” You may feel tired, have blurred vision, or feel sick to your stomach. Tell your psychiatrist if you have these or any other side effects.

Talk therapy

- “Talk” therapy involves talking to someone such as a **psychologist**, **social worker**, or **counselor**. It helps you learn to change how bipolar disorder makes you think, feel, and act. Ask your psychiatrist who you should go to for talk therapy.

You can feel better.



How to help someone with severe mood changes

If you know someone who is having severe mood changes and may need help, here are some things you can do:

- Tell the person that you are concerned about him or her.
- Share this booklet with the person.
- Talk to the person about seeing a doctor.
- Take the person to see the doctor.
- If the doctor offers the name and phone number of a psychiatrist or someone for “talk” therapy, call the number and help the person make an appointment.
- Take the person to the appointment.
- “Be there” for the person after he or she starts treatment.
- Contact any of the places listed under “For more information” in this booklet.

For more information:

You can call or write any of these organizations for free information about bipolar disorder. You can also find more information on their web sites. “Free call” phone numbers can be used free by anyone, anywhere in the United States.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Office of Communications and
Public Liaison

Information Resources and Inquiries Branch
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Free call: 1-800-421-4211

Local call: 301-443-4513

Hearing impaired (TTY): 301-443-8431

Web site: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

E-mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov

**National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
(NAMI)**

2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042

Free call: 1-800-950-6264

Local call: 703-524-7600

Web site: <http://www.nami.org>

**National Depressive and Manic
Depressive Association (NDMDA)**

730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60601-7204

Free call: 1-800-826-3632

Local call: 312-642-0049

Web site: <http://www.ndmda.org>

**National Foundation for Depressive
Illness, Inc. (NAFDI)**

P.O. Box 2257

New York, NY 10116

Free call: 1-800-239-1265

Local call: 212-268-4260

Web site: <http://www.depression.org>

**National Mental Health Association
(NMHA)**

1021 Prince Street

Alexandria, VA 22314-2971

Free call: 1-800-969-6642

Local call: 703-684-7722

Free call - hearing impaired (TTY):

1-800-433-5959

Web site: <http://www.nmha.org>

Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation

1187 Willmette Avenue, PMB #331

Willmette, IL 60091

Local call: 847-256-8525

Web site: <http://www.bpkids.org>

This publication has been adapted by Melissa Spearing,
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Fax numbers:

301-443-4279

301-443-5158 (FAX 4U)

Street address:

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Office of Communications

Room 8184, MSC 9663

6001 Executive Boulevard

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Things to remember:

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- 2** Understand that bipolar disorder is a real illness.
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