

# Bipolar disorder in young people



## What the fact sheet covers:

- Signs of bipolar disorder in young people
- Management of bipolar disorder
- How to help a young person with bipolar disorder
- Where to get more information

## Introduction

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is an uncommon but serious condition that typically begins to emerge during mid to late adolescence (15–18 years old).

## Signs of bipolar disorder in young people

Bipolar disorder can be difficult to recognise in young people as the illness can be ‘hidden’ by significant behavioural problems such as irritability and aggression, as well as more common symptoms such as anxiety.

Bipolar disorder can sometimes present more clearly following initiation of an SSRI which can lead to “switching” (emergence of hypomanic or manic symptoms).

Signs of bipolar disorder in young people may include:

- Rapidly changing moods lasting a few hours to a few days
- Signs of a first episode of psychosis
- The presence of common comorbidities – including generalised or social anxiety OCD, eating disorders, difficulties with substance use
- Excessive involvement in multiple projects or activities
- Family history (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or depression)
- Excessive cravings – usually for carbohydrates or sweets
- Risky or inappropriate behaviours.





Bipolar disorder can be complicated to diagnose and assessment is usually longitudinal, to rule out possible differential diagnoses, such as borderline personality disorder, ADHD, PTSD, and other types of depression.

### Management of bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder is an illness that requires long term treatment. There are serious risks to delaying diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder in young people. Social/peer relations, academic performance, family relationships and psychological maturation are all affected by bipolar disorder (both highs and lows).

There is currently no known cure for bipolar disorder. However, with proper treatment bipolar disorder can be effectively controlled.

A good management plan for young people with bipolar disorder may include:

- Evidence-based treatment of comorbid mental health issues such as anxiety and eating disorders
- Support to maintain regular adolescent milestones such as participating in study
- Medication
- Close monitoring of symptoms
- Education about the illness
- Counselling or psychotherapy for the individual and family
- Stress reduction
- Good nutrition

- Regular sleep and exercise: see our Fact Sheet **Exercise and Depression**
- Participation in a support network
- Mood charting – you can download from our [website](#).

The sooner a management plan is put in place the less frequent and intense the episodes can be.

### How to help a young person with bipolar disorder

Adolescence can be a tumultuous time for young people. Young people with bipolar disorder may not understand what is happening to them or may think that the highs and lows of bipolar disorder are simply part of growing up. Young people may need help recognising that their mood swings may be related to bipolar disorder.

- Talk to the young person and let them know that you are concerned.
- Help the young person identify possible contributing factors for why they may feel unwell i.e. stress, exams, drugs, situations at home.
- Recommend an assessment by a GP.
- After seeing a GP, the young person may be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist; let the young person know that they can bring a friend or family member along for support.
- If the young person is prescribed a treatment plan or medication, assist them in closely following the instructions.



## Where to get more information

A **Daily Mood Graph** and other relevant Fact Sheets can be downloaded from our website at: [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/fact-sheets/](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/fact-sheets/)

**Mastering Bipolar Disorder: an insider's guide to managing mood swings and finding balance**, Kerrie Eyers & Gordon Parker (2008) Allen & Unwin.

**1800 011 511 Mental Health Line** is a NSW Government phone service operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will provide a telephone triage assessment and referral service staffed by mental health clinicians.



### For more information

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