

Bipolar Disorder

Understanding and Help
for Extreme Mood Swings

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We all have mood swings. We can be a little gloomy one day, brighter the next. But if you are struggling with mania, your moods can be exaggerated and unrestrained, which makes life miserable for both you and the people you love.

These moods are not merely the normal ups and downs of life. For example, you may feel great and energetic. Most of us feel like that once in a while. But then the roof explodes: sleeplessness and racing thoughts are added to the mix and suddenly life becomes much more complicated. Or take optimism and self-confidence. There are times when you feel like you know what you're doing, and you feel good about it. But then self-confidence and optimism exceed their normal boundaries. Suddenly you find yourself at a blackjack table, vastly overestimating your luck. Next, with whatever money is left, you play a hunch in the stock market. You are so certain of success (although others have given their warnings) that you use your retirement money and max out your credit cards. You see, when you're feeling buoyant and "up," you believe you can do no wrong. And if something does go wrong, the problem doesn't register

as a big deal. When your mood and energy level are at those higher extremes, you just can't imagine a bad outcome. Barriers to success do not exist. The experience can be such an infusion of confidence that you overlook any contrary opinion or circumstances that, when your mood is more restrained, would lead you to take a very different course of action.

These kinds of mood swings and accompanying behavior have come to be known as mania, manic-depression, or bipolar disorder.

How long does a manic episode last? An hour? A month? When will it return? Next month? Next spring? Next decade? Will you ever feel normal? What does it even mean to feel normal? Unpredictability is what you can count on.

Mania Is Unique to Each Person

The cycles in and out of mania are unique to each person. For some, the highs never become extreme and are noticeable only to family members. For others, mania is apparent to everyone.

If your mood swings were predictable you could prepare yourself and others for them. But with mania the swings aren't predictable. Without warning they can travel from low to high and back again. If you have the high, the low is almost inevitable. It's as if the body can't sustain the energetic highs, and its plea for rest overshoots its goal and careens toward depression.

Focus, for now, on the mania. Here are some feelings you might experience during your high periods:

- Restless
- Energetic
- Garrulous; talkative
- A mind full of thoughts and plans
- Happy; up; funny; exhilarated
- Brimming with high self-esteem, without self-doubt
- Confused and out-of-control, especially when the mania won't stop

Subtract “restless” and “confused and out-of-control” from this list, and mania doesn't seem half bad. You may

consider it a welcome change from the down times. And who couldn't use more energy? This is mania's subtle allure.

Mania Is Not Easy on Those Who Love You

Mania, however, is not a welcome change for you, especially when it turns into chaos, and it is certainly not a welcome change for your family and friends. Here's what others might see in you when you are manic:

- Impaired judgment
- Unwillingness to listen to advice
- Reckless, impulsive, risky behavior, especially with money or sex
- Inappropriate joking
- Incoherent speech
- Irritability
- Nonstop energy that keeps others awake (because they are wondering what impulsive decision you might make while everyone sleeps)
- Resolute self-centeredness

You are on an adventure; they are living a nightmare. They are never quite sure who will show up from