



Bipolar Disorder - Information for Families

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Bipolar Disorder is a complex mental illness characterized by prominent moodswings beyond the range experienced by most persons. The person with bipolar disorder may cycle from depression to manic (highly active and excitable) or hypomanic (moderately active or excitable) phases. These cycles may be rapid (over a matter of days) or the cycles may stretch out over a period of months or longer. Persons with severe bipolar disorder may suffer from hallucinations. They may also endanger themselves or others, either through suicidality during a depressed phase, or through the rash actions and poor impulse control common during a manic phase. For some general thoughts on dealing with a loved one's diagnosis of a mental illness such as bipolar disorder, please see our ["Mental Illness - Information for Families"](#) page. Bipolar Disorder generally responds well to medication and therapy. Mood stabilizers such as Lithium Carbonate have proven to be effective in moderating the severe moodswings characteristic of this disorder. Many people with bipolar disorder respond well to treatment and lead happy and productive lives. Other people with this illness may not fare so well, especially if they avoid treatment. Persons with bipolar disorder may be resistant to treatment and to medication. The person with bipolar disorder often thinks that he or she feels great when in a manic phase, and is resistant to taking medication that "brings them down". They go off their medication, often with disastrous results. Another common occurrence is that the person with bipolar disorder believes that he or she is "cured" when the moodswings are controlled with medication. They then think they can go off the medication (the way one would stop taking antibiotics after flu symptoms stop). However, bipolar disorder is an ongoing illness, and medication should not be stopped without consulting a psychiatrist. In terms of treatment approaches, it appears that bipolar disorder responds best to a combination of medication therapy and "talk" therapy to work through underlying issues and develop insight. If hospitalization is necessary, it is best to work toward initial stabilization of mood and symptoms, and then to move into an environment in which the client has greater and greater freedom in proportion to his or her recovery. Remember that with proper treatment, bipolar disorder can be controlled in most people. **If your family member is out of control or suicidal (danger of harm to self or others), stay calm and call 911. Do not try to handle it alone.**

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