Bipolar Disorder is a biological illness that affects your ability to regulate your mood effectively. People with Bipolar Disorder can have episodes of mania, hypomania, and depression.

**Mania** or a **Manic Episode**: The high or elevated period of Bipolar Disorder. There is a distinctively elevated or irritable mood in combination with three or more additional symptoms of mania (from the following):

- **Increased self-confidence**: Believing in your abilities with far more confidence than usual. This can lead to unhealthy decisions.
- **Decreased need for sleep**: Sleeping far less than usual yet still waking up feeling energized in the morning.
- **Talkativeness**: Talking much faster and louder; starting conversations impulsively with strangers; speech may be pressured.
- **Racing thoughts**: Feeling like your thoughts are coming faster than you can put them into words.
- **Distractibility**: Getting easily distracted because you perceive everything to be of interest to you. Focusing suffers greatly.
- **Increased impulsive behaviors**: Taking on several projects at once and these projects may be not in your best interest.
- **Psychomotor agitation**: Feeling very physically restless and tense.
- **Increased pleasurable activities**: Seeking out highly pleasurable behaviors (e.g., sex, gambling, shopping, traveling) in ways that may not be healthy for you.

**Depressive Episode**: The low or intensely sad period of Bipolar Disorder characterized by at least five symptoms (from the following):

- **Feeling depressed**: Feeling down in the dumbs or really sad for no particular reason.
- **Psychomotor agitation or slowing**: Feeling agitated, restless, or unable to sit still... or feeling extremely slowed down in thinking and movement.
- **Lack of enjoyment**: Inability to enjoy the things that used to bring you pleasure.
- **Social isolation**: Lack of desire to be with friends or family members.
- **Emotional brittleness**: Feelings of irritability, anger, and/or anxiety, an inability to concentrate.
- **Changes in eating habits**: Marked weight gain or loss; too much or too little interest in eating.
- **Sleep changes**: Significant changes in sleep habits, such as trouble falling asleep or getting up in the morning.
- **Guilt feelings**: Feeling guilty or worthless.
- **Body aches**: Physical aches and pains even though nothing is physically wrong.
- **Hopelessness**: Lack of caring and/or negativity about what happens in the future.
- **Suicidal thinking**: Thoughts of hurting or killing oneself.

**Hypomanic Episode**: Similar to a **manic episode** though less severe and disruptive to a person’s life. A hypomanic episode generally lasts **less than one week**.
A college student who is in the midst of a manic episode may have very limited insight into his/her illness at that time. Trusted family members or friends should pay close attention and help the individual seek appropriate mental health services promptly. Individuals with Bipolar Disorder sometimes stop taking their medications, for various reasons. Without the medication helping to stabilize mood, these individuals can be highly at risk for harm.

Experts indicate that the best treatment for Bipolar Disorder is combination treatment including medication therapy, education about the disorder, and talk therapy (individual, family, and/or group therapy).

Coping Strategies for Dealing with Bipolar Disorder

1. Take medication as prescribed. Pay close attention to how the medication makes you feel, what benefits it seems to be providing, and what side effects it might be causing. Communicate actively with your doctor/nurse practitioner. Sometimes, a medication dosage may need to be increased or decreased; other times, different medication might be suggested.

2. Journal each day, listing what indicators of progress you see and what concerns you. Note what you eat and how your sleep pattern is.


4. Push yourself to share your feelings each day with a trusted friend and/or family member. Get that person’s observations about your status/progress.

5. Avoid alcohol and drugs as they can interfere with the effectiveness of psychiatric medications.

6. Get exercise daily, whether walking, yoga, playing a sport, going to the gym, or doing an exercise routine in the privacy of your own home. In the winter months, be sure to get outside and get some Vitamin D from the sun while walking. Having an exercise buddy can help increase your motivation and success with exercise.

7. Be more mindful of what you eat and drink. Oftentimes, Bipolar Disorder can lead an individual to high-calorie, high-sugar, high caffeine food/drinks, which ultimately can increase the severity of the disorder. Try to eat healthier foods, and don’t skip breakfast!

8. Be more mindful of your sleeping habits. If you do take a nap during the day, limit it to 30 minutes. Afternoon naps that exceed 30 minutes can often mess up overnight sleeping. Set up your bedroom so it encourages good sleep. Keep the room dark and at a comfortable temperature. Work to reduce stimulation at night to allow your brain to calm itself. Set a rule of shutting off electronics (e.g., computer, phone, television) at a certain hour each night. Aim to fall asleep at the same time each night.

9. Reach out for additional help whenever you need it. Untreated or poorly managed Bipolar Disorder can be extremely serious and even life-threatening, so please speak up. Develop a written safety plan with your therapist that identifies how you can reach out when there is an emergency.

10. Remember that treatment for Bipolar Disorder takes time and diligent effort. With every step, you get closer to effectively regulating your mood and behavior.