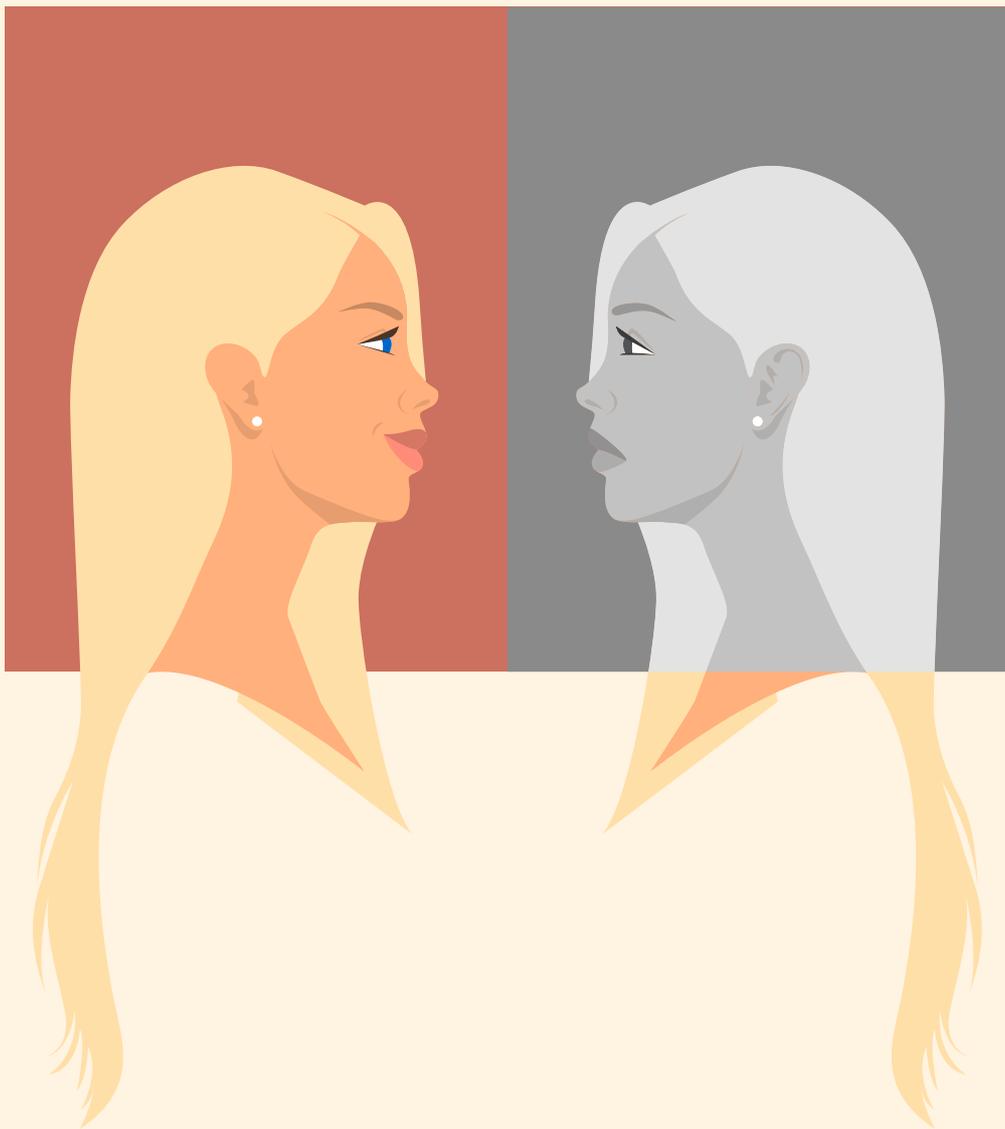


BIPOLAR

Disorder



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BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that causes dramatic shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to think clearly. People with bipolar experience high and low moods—known as mania and depression—which differ from the typical ups-and-downs most people experience.

The average age-of-onset is about 25, but it can occur in the teens, or more uncommonly, in childhood.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms and their severity can vary. A person with bipolar disorder may have distinct manic or depressed states but may also have extended periods—sometimes years—without symptoms. A person can also experience both extremes simultaneously or in rapid sequence.

Severe bipolar episodes of mania or depression may include psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions. Usually, these psychotic symptoms mirror a person's extreme mood. People with bipolar disorder who have psychotic symptoms can be wrongly diagnosed as having schizophrenia.

MANIA

Mania. To be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a person must have experienced at least one episode of mania or hypomania. Hypomania is a milder form of mania that doesn't include psychotic episodes. People with hypomania can often function well in social situations or at work. Some people with bipolar disorder will have episodes of mania or hypomania many times throughout their life; others may experience them only rarely.

Although someone with bipolar may find an elevated mood of mania appealing—especially if it occurs after depression—the “high” does not stop at a comfortable or controllable level. Moods can rapidly become more irritable, behaviour more unpredictable and judgement more impaired. During periods of mania, people frequently behave impulsively, make reckless decisions and take unusual risks.

Most of the time, people in manic states are unaware of the negative consequences of their actions. With bipolar disorder, suicide is an ever-present danger because some people become suicidal even in manic states. Learning from prior episodes what kinds of behaviour signals “red flags” of manic behaviour can help manage the symptoms of the illness.

DEPRESSION

Depression. The lows of bipolar depression are often so debilitating that people may be unable to get out of bed. Typically, people experiencing a depressive episode have difficulty falling and staying asleep, while others sleep far more than usual. When people are depressed, even minor decisions such as what to eat for dinner can be overwhelming. They may become obsessed with feelings of loss, personal failure, guilt or helplessness; this negative thinking can lead to thoughts of suicide.

The depressive symptoms that obstruct a person's ability to function must be present nearly every day for a period of at least two weeks for a diagnosis. Depression associated with bipolar disorder may be more difficult to treat and require a customised treatment plan.