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**There is NO health  
without mental health!**

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## **"What is Bipolar Disorder?" A Guide to Hope and Recovery for African Americans**

[Bipolar disorder](#) (also called manic depression) is a serious medical condition that causes extremes in a person's mood and behavior. It is not a weakness of character, family or faith, or something you can resolve on your own. Though it affects people of every race, many African Americans with the problem do not receive help. When bipolar disorder goes unchecked, it can disrupt the lives of those who have it and of the people close to them. But, with help, people with bipolar disorder can get better and get on with their lives.

What are the signs of bipolar disorder? People with bipolar disorder go from periods of feeling very "high," called mania or manic, to periods of feeling very low or depressed. An episode is the period of time you have the mania or depression. In between, there are times of level moods and normal behavior. The information below can help you determine if you have symptoms of bipolar disorder. Mania When at the high end or manic, you may experience the following signs for at least a week: feeling unusually high or joyful; a big ego; feeling very self-important; fast speech and racing thoughts that are hard for others to follow; irritability; increased energy (lots of moving around) and restlessness; more risk taking and reckless behavior (example: spending too much money, inappropriate sexual behavior, making foolish business investments); needing little sleep yet having great energy; easily distracted/trouble concentrating; feeling paranoid or having delusions.

### [Depression](#)

When depressed, a person usually shows these signs for two weeks: nervousness, anxiety and worry; feelings of sadness and hopelessness that won't go away; difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much; loss of appetite or eating too much; loss of energy with little interest in daily activities; pulling away from social activities/occasions; trouble concentrating; thoughts about suicide.

### **Who Gets Bipolar Disorder?**

More than 2.5 million Americans have bipolar disorder. It affects people of all races and backgrounds. It usually starts between the ages of 15 and 19 but can begin as late as middle age. However, many people go several years before they get a diagnosis from a doctor. Call a doctor and make an appointment right away if: You have had some symptoms for two weeks or longer The symptoms are getting in the way of your daily life You are thinking about suicide

### **What Causes Bipolar Disorder?**

No one knows for sure what causes bipolar disorder. Causes may include brain chemistry, family history, use of alcohol and drugs, and stressful or disturbing events.

### **How is Bipolar Disorder Treated?**

**Medicines** Most people with bipolar disorder need to take one or more medicines to help even out their moods. Tips when taking medications: Some people may feel side effects from the medicine. Be sure to tell your doctor what you are experiencing. Give the medicine time to work. Some find it takes a few weeks or even longer to feel a difference. Your doctor may suggest you take more or less medicine in the beginning until you find the amount that works for you. Some studies have shown that African Americans may be more sensitive to different medications. Since there is no known cure for bipolar disorder right now, you may need to take medicine throughout your life to treat your condition.

## **Psychotherapy**

This is a type of counseling where a trained mental health professional helps you talk about your moods and behaviors, and solve problems. Therapy can give you new ways to manage stress and avoid negative events that can set off mood swings.

Consider joining a support group. Talking with other people who also have bipolar disorder can help you feel less alone and more informed about your illness and treatments. There are support groups for people with bipolar disorder in many towns and cities.

## **Take These Steps to Get Help for Bipolar Disorder**

1. **Make the first phone call; talk to a doctor.** You may feel too tired or upset to seek treatment. But, make this first phone call. Call your family doctor if you feel more comfortable starting with him or her. Explain your moods, how quickly they change, and how often they occur. You may want to take this fact sheet along with you. Your doctor can then help you find someone experienced in treating bipolar disorder.
2. **Meet with a mental health professional.** Getting well requires the help of a mental health professional. Just as you would see a cardiologist if you found out you had a heart problem, you need to see someone who specializes in mental health for bipolar disorder.
3. **Keep all appointments.** Some days you may not feel like going to the doctor or therapist. But it is important that you keep all of your appointments. Ask a friend to go along if you do not feel like going alone.
4. **Take your medicines the right way.** Take your medications faithfully (even if you're feeling fine). Make sure you follow the directions on the bottle. And, take all the doses. If you have any questions, contact your doctor.
5. **Take care of your health.** Get enough sleep. Set regular times to go to bed and wake up. Irregular sleep may set off your mood swings. Take a walk or do some exercise every day. Eat healthy foods. Do not use drugs or alcohol.
6. **Try to reduce stress in your life as much as possible.** Learn to manage the stressful things in your life. Also, learn to spot the signs of an upcoming mood change, so you can act on it quickly. For example, if you notice that you are talking rapidly or having racing thoughts, you may try to avoid situations with too much activity.

## **Getting Past the Shame**

You may feel that you can deal with this on your own or don't want to be labeled as "crazy," and have chosen not to get help. But, without help, bipolar disorder can lead to broken relationships, problems with jobs, and even suicide. Seeking help is a healthy thing to do.

## **When You Have an Addiction**

Many people with bipolar disorder abuse alcohol and take drugs to dull the pain. If you have bipolar disorder and an addiction, you will need to get treated for both. In many cases, you may need to go into detox before a diagnosis of bipolar disorder can be made. It can be difficult for your doctor to tell which came first. This is especially true for those who use cocaine.

## **Paying for Treatment**

Finding a way to pay for treatment can be difficult, but there are options. If you're employed and have a health plan, call your health insurer to see if they cover mental health services. Then find out which psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in your area are willing to accept payment from your insurance plan. If your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), they can also help you find services you can afford.

If you get health care through a government program like Medicaid or Medicare, you should receive services through their doctors.

If you don't have mental health insurance coverage and can't afford the doctor fees, ask whether a psychiatrist or counselor will adjust the fee based on your income. If not, can they refer you to someone who does? Call your local mental health office and medical/psychiatric associations to find out about free mental health services in your community. Ask your doctor or therapist if they can recommend any research studies for bipolar disorder, which are a way to get the latest medications and treatment at no cost. Ask for full details about the program before agreeing to volunteer.

## **The Role of Faith in Recovery**

If you're religious, your spiritual strength can carry you a long way toward recovery, along with treatment. Practicing your faith and worshipping with people who care about you can help keep you strong, focused and connected to a healing force.

**Be hopeful. With help, you can get better!**