

Bipolar Disorder

- Profound mood swings – extreme highs (manic, excited, disorganised) & lows (flat, almost catatonic, unable to think)
- Grandiosity – buying an airline while on benefits, feeling invulnerable, full of ideas. Can be very creative and able to drive ideas forwards on the way up but crash and burn if they reach the peak
- Risk of death – by suicide towards but not at the bottom of the curve, or by thrill-seeking risky activity
- Most common treatment – lithium

Short descriptions from *Bipolar Disorder, Management of Bipolar Disorder in Adults, Children and Adolescents in Primary and Secondary Care*. ISBN 978-1-85433-441-1 2006

Box 1: DSM-IV criteria for a manic episode
(American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 332)

- A. A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive or irritable mood, lasting at least 1 week (or any duration if hospitalisation is necessary).
- B. During the period of mood disturbance, three (or more) of the following symptoms have persisted (four if the mood is only irritable) and have been present to a significant degree:
1. inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
 2. decreased need for sleep (e.g., feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
 3. more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
 4. flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing
 5. distractibility (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli)
 6. increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work or school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation
 7. excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g., engaging in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments)

Vignette of a patient with mania

I first fell ill with rapid-cycling bipolar disorder at the age of 19. At first, when manic, I felt 'on top of the world', much more sociable than normal and very active and self-confident. I'd have an 'up' of about 9 days, followed by a 'down' for the same period. The same pattern would repeat itself with my mood swings becoming more and more extreme each time. Within a few months, I was experiencing full-blown psychosis. When manic, I was euphoric. Everything was in overdrive. I would only sleep for an hour or two a night. I craved stimulation, whether it was smoking, even though I'm a non-smoker, driving fast or listening to more and much louder music than was normal for me.

As I entered a manic cycle, my thoughts would start to race. I'd develop delusions of grandeur. Suddenly everything seemed to revolve around me and I was the most important thing in the world. The most extreme manifestation of this was the religious delusions I experienced when psychotic. Despite not having a Christian upbringing, I came to secretly believe I was some sort of manifestation of Jesus Christ on a God-given mission. Wherever I looked I saw 'the face of God' staring out at me. For a while, I was haunted by light switches turn with the screw either side of the switch representing the eyes and nose of a face.

And then, as sure as night follows day, everything would come crashing down after about 9 days and I would plunge into a deep depression, in bed 18 hours a day. My thoughts became painfully sluggish and grossly distorted in a negative way. I felt suicidal and haunted by irrational self-doubt such as the belief I was certain to end up homeless or that people thought I was a paedophile because I was standing outside a school.

And depression

I was desperately unhappy. Small things like going to the shops and talking to people – even my girlfriend – left me wracked with anxiety. I just came to think I was miserable by nature. I was regularly in contact with several general practitioners (GPs) and psychiatrists over this time, but none identified that I was experiencing sub-syndromal symptoms.

I think there were three reasons for this. My symptoms weren't full-blown major depression – mostly I wasn't suicidal – and I was able to hold down a job and a relationship, so on the surface I appeared to be functioning. Also, my psychiatrists seemed to rely on my judgement as to my health and perhaps would have made treatment recommendations if I'd complained bitterly about feeling depressed. Unfortunately, without having a recent benchmark of experiencing 'normal' mood to compare against, I didn't realise I was depressed. However, there were lots of things which in hindsight were tell-tale signs that I wasn't well.