Bipolar Disorder

What is bipolar disorder?
Bipolar disorder is a brain disease that causes a person to have cycles of extreme mood changes that go beyond normal ups and downs. A person with bipolar cycles between periods of feeling elated, energized and excited with periods of feeling sad and depressed. For this reason, it’s also known as manic depression.

What causes bipolar disorder?
The cause of bipolar is not known. Experts agree many factors seem to play a role. This includes environmental, psychological, and genetic factors. Bipolar tends to run in families. Researchers are still trying to find genes that may be linked to this disorder.

How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?
To diagnose bipolar, your doctor will ask about your symptoms. You may have both depressive and manic symptoms to a varying degree. The symptoms of bipolar may look like other mental health conditions. Always see a health care provider for a diagnosis. A diagnosis is made after a careful psychi atric exam and medical history done by a mental health professional.

How is bipolar disorder treated?
There is no cure for bipolar, but treatment works well for many people. Treatment may include one or a combination of the following:

- **Medication.** Many different drugs are available for bipolar, but it often takes 4 to 6 weeks for anti-depressants to have a full effect. So, it’s important to keep taking the medicine, even if it doesn’t seem to be working at first. It’s also important to talk to the doctor before stopping. Some people have to switch medicines or add medicines to get results.

- **Therapy.** This is most often cognitive-behavioral or interpersonal therapy. It focuses on changing the distorted views you have of yourself and your environment. It works to improve your interpersonal relationship skills. It also helps you identify stressors and learn how to manage them. Many therapies also help you use the spiritual practices of your faith tradition to cope and find strength.

- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).** Doctors use this treatment for people with severe, life-threatening depression that has not responded to medicines. A brief electrical current is passed through the brain, triggering a mild seizure. For unknown reasons, this helps restore the normal balance of chemicals in the brain and ease symptoms.

In most cases, people need consistent, long-term, treatment to stabilize the mood swings.

Dear God, mental illness can be scary and embarrassing. Help me understand this illness better so I can get the treatment I need and see myself as the beautiful person you have created.

Coping with mental illness in your family

Here are three guidelines for family members who have a loved one with a mental illness:

1. **Accept your feelings.** Avoid placing blame or feeling guilt. You did not cause the illness, and the person diagnosed didn’t either. Blaming yourself limits your ability to look to the future and find supportive resources. A mental health professional can help family members cope with their feelings, so they can be supportive to the loved one diagnosed with the illness.

2. **Take time for yourself.** When family members are ill, they can easily become the focus of your attention. Other family members may feel neglected and become resentful. Try to keep a balance and maintain your regular family functions. If you are the caretaker, plan activities for yourself and with other family members so you don’t become frustrated and upset. This will help keep perspective and patience.

Remember, people can recover from mental illness and lead productive lives. Being supportive to a family member diagnosed with mental illness can improve that process, but it is important to manage the feelings and needs of other family members, too.

3. **Seek support.** Gather information from reliable sources, such as mental health professionals, and share what you have learned with others. Getting support from friends and family members who can provide compassion without judgment is helpful, but support from community organizations is, too. The National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance offer support and education classes specifically for family members to learn about mental illness and how to care for themselves and their loved ones.

Your faith community is also a good place to share your story and find support. You will find that you are not the only one who is struggling and your story will give others courage to come forward, too.

With proper support, education and self-care, much of the negative impact from the illness can be eliminated.

**Resources:** Advocate Health Care - [www.advocatehealth.com](http://www.advocatehealth.com); Mental Health Ministries - [www.mentalhealthministries.net](http://www.mentalhealthministries.net); Interfaith Mental Health Coalition - [http://www.interfaithmhc.org/](http://www.interfaithmhc.org/); Mental Health America - [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net); National Alliance on Mental Illness FaithNet - [www.nami.org/NAMIFaithnet](http://www.nami.org/NAMIFaithnet)