

# Understanding the Early Warning Signs of Bipolar Disorder in Teens

## Introduction

When I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I experienced vivid hallucinations. While in the hospital, I believed that all my colleagues and gym friends were also there and interacting with each other, none of which was true. Prior to going to the hospital, I was taking a walk and suddenly images of my roommate being taken hostage came into my mind. Rather than dismiss this thought as untrue, I ran back to my house, convinced that she was being taken away. These delusions are early warning signs of a manic episode in bipolar disorder<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of this article is for you to understand the early warning signs of bipolar disorder in teens.

## Understanding Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that is marked by significant changes in mood and behavior<sup>2</sup>. This may look like your child getting more excited or irritable than other children or your child going through cycles of extreme ups and downs in mood and energy levels compared to other kids<sup>2</sup>. These mood swings may occur at school or at home<sup>2</sup>. In the US, 1% to 2% of all children under 18 have bipolar disorder<sup>3</sup>. In fact, 1 out of every 6 young people suffers from a mental health condition that will persist, especially if they do not receive professional help<sup>3</sup>.

## Early Warning Signs

People with bipolar disorder have either manic or depressive episodes<sup>4</sup>. Mania is feeling more happy or energetic than normal while depression is feeling more down and less active than normal<sup>2</sup>. Early warning signs of a manic episode include<sup>4</sup>:

- Showing intense happiness or silliness
- Having a very short temper or seeming extremely irritable
- Talking very fast or having racing thoughts
- Having an inflated sense of ability, knowledge, or power
- Doing reckless things that show poor judgement

Conversely, early warning signs of a depressive episode include<sup>4</sup>:

- Feeling very sad or hopeless
- Feeling lonely or isolating from others
- Eating too much or too little
- Having little energy and no interest in usual activities
- Sleeping too much

## Common Triggers

Many factors can lead up to a bipolar episode. Some common triggers include<sup>5</sup>:

- Stress: losing a close family member, losing a job, going through a significant breakup or experiencing a natural disaster
- Sleep disturbances: sleep deprivation has been linked to mania
- Certain drugs: antidepressants, corticosteroid hormones, St John's Wort, acetyl-L-carnitine, and caffeinated drinks may trigger mood shifts
- Weather changes: seasonal affective disorder affects about 1 in 4 people with bipolar disorder
- Hormonal changes: testosterone, estradiol, progesterone, and C-reactive protein rise during manic episodes

## Treatment Options

A combination of medication, therapy, and lifestyle changes can be used to treat bipolar disorder among teens<sup>3</sup>. Different medications or more than one type of medication may be needed to see results<sup>2</sup>. Once on medication, the patient should avoid stopping the medication abruptly without the guidance of a healthcare provider because this can cause worsening of symptoms<sup>2</sup>. Cognitive behavioral therapy and family-focused therapy provide skills for maintaining routines, improving emotional regulation, and enhancing social interactions<sup>2</sup>. In addition, incorporating healthy sleep habits into daily life is an important part of treatment<sup>3</sup>.

## Caregiver Strategies

Caring for someone with bipolar disorder can be difficult. The first step is to learn about the symptoms, triggers, and treatment and pay attention to how it manifests in your loved one specifically. Help your loved one mitigate their triggers (e.g., lower stress, get better sleep). Identify short-term strategies, like going for a walk, and long-term strategies like exercising regularly, taking medication consistently, and eating a nutritious diet. Most importantly, take care of yourself to avoid caregiver burnout. This might involve eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, exercising, joining a support group, or talking to a therapist<sup>6</sup>.

## Conclusion

Knowing the early warning signs of bipolar disorder can speed up intervention and treatment efforts. Familiarize yourself with signs of mania and depression and common triggers of bipolar disorder. By educating yourself and providing practical and emotional support, you can help your loved one live a productive and satisfying life. For further reading, visit the National Institute of Mental Health's resource on bipolar disorder in children and teens.

## References

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