

Bipolar Disorder What it is and what helps

A mood condition that cycles, and why sleep and rhythm matter so much.

WHAT IT IS

Bipolar disorder is a mood condition that cycles. Mood sits on a spectrum, with no clean line between bipolar and ordinary depression. The aim of treatment is to calm the cycling, not just fix today's mood.

Hypomania is a lift in energy that can look like a great stretch: less sleep without feeling tired, fast talking, new projects. Bipolar II isn't mild. Depression takes up far more of the time than the highs.

WHY RHYTHM MATTERS

Sleep is the vital sign of bipolar disorder. The illness is about rhythm: irregular sleep, light and routine can set off episodes, and steady ones protect against them.

Bipolar-type depression often looks different: leaden energy, sleeping 12 to 16 hours, carb cravings, starting young, and bipolar illness in the family.

TREATMENT HAS THREE PARTS, AND MOST PEOPLE DO BEST WITH ALL THREE

Rhythm

A fixed wake time, dark evenings, morning light, and regular meals and social contact.

Therapy

Group psychoeducation, family-focused therapy and social rhythm therapy teach you the pattern.

Medication

Mood stabilizers like lithium or lamotrigine work slowly, over months, and are long term, like blood pressure medicine.

Sleep, routine and limiting alcohol and drugs are part of treatment, not extras.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- **Up:** sleep drops (say 7 hours to 4) and you feel great; racing thoughts, irritability, new projects, spending
- **Down:** leaden energy, oversleeping, carb cravings
- **Mixed:** tired and wired, desperate, impulsive. The riskiest state: call right away

WHEN YOU SEE THEM

- Ask first: how is my sleep?
- Protect sleep and cut stimulation
- Call your prescriber and bring your sleep and mood tracking
- Ask family to be a second set of eyes, since insight often goes first
- Write an early-warning plan while you are well

Daily rhythm checklist. Check one or two to start with.

- ☐ Get up at the same time every day, weekends included
- ☐ Go to bed at the same time each night
- ☐ Dim the lights about 2 hours before bed
- ☐ Wear amber glasses in the evening (not before 6 pm)
- ☐ Keep the bedroom pitch dark and cool

- ☐ Get outdoor daylight and movement in the morning
- ☐ Keep meals, work and social contact at regular times
- ☐ No caffeine after early afternoon
- ☐ Limit alcohol, which breaks up sleep
- ☐ Track sleep and mood with a simple app or chart

MEDICATION SAFETY

- Keep taking it when you feel well. That is it working.
- Never stop suddenly. Taper with your prescriber.
- Ask before starting or stopping an antidepressant. Alone, it can destabilize mood.
- Lithium: skip NSAID pain relievers; keep salt and fluids steady
- Lamotrigine: stop and get care for any new rash

BOOKS AND RESOURCES

The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide by David Miklowitz. The one to buy if you buy one thing.

An Unquiet Mind by Kay Redfield Jamison. **Bipolar, Not So Much** by Chris Aiken and James Phelps. **Reset Your Inner Clock** by Michael Terman.

Apps: eMoods and Mind Numbers. Site: psycheducation.org.

IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE OR HURTING YOURSELF

Mixed states carry the highest risk. Call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time, or go to the nearest emergency room. If you are in immediate danger, call **911**.

Source. Adapted from the Sleep Control guide, Psychofarm podcast episodes and Dr. Jim Phelps's teaching on the mood spectrum.

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