



We've been there.
We can help.

Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) is the leading patient-directed national organization focusing on the most prevalent mental illnesses. The organization fosters an environment of understanding about the impact and management of these life-threatening illnesses by providing up-to-date, scientifically-based tools and information written in language the general public can understand. DBSA supports research to promote more timely diagnosis, develop more effective and tolerable treatments and discover a cure. The organization works to ensure that people living with mood disorders are treated equitably.

Assisted by a Scientific Advisory Board comprised of the leading researchers and clinicians in the field of mood disorders, DBSA has more than 1,000 peer-run support groups across the country. Four million people request and receive information and assistance each year. DBSA's mission is to improve the lives of people living with mood disorders.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

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Visit our updated, interactive website for important information, breaking news, chapter connections, advocacy help and much more.

DBSA does not endorse or recommend the use of any specific treatment, medication or resource mentioned in this brochure. For advice about specific treatments or medications, individuals should consult their physicians and/or mental health professionals. This brochure is not intended to take the place of a visit to a qualified health care provider.

Introduction to Depression and Bipolar Disorder



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Depression

It's Not Just in Your Head

Everyone, at various times in life, feels sad. This is normal. Sometimes sadness is due to things that happen in your life: you move to a different city and leave behind friends, you lose your job or a loved one dies. But what's the difference between "normal" feelings of sadness and the feelings caused by depression?

How to Recognize Depression

Depression is not a character flaw or sign of personal weakness. You can't make yourself well by trying to "snap out of it" or "lighten up." And you can't catch it from someone else, although it can run in families. To understand what depression is, it's important to recognize the symptoms:

- Prolonged sadness or unexplained crying spells
- Significant changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- Irritability, anger, agitation
- Worry, anxiety
- Pessimism, indifference
- Loss of energy, persistent lethargy
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or hopelessness
- Inability to concentrate, indecisiveness
- Inability to take pleasure in former interests, social withdrawal
- Excessive consumption of alcohol or use of chemical substances
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

If you or someone you know has thoughts of death or suicide, contact a medical professional, clergy member, loved one or friend *immediately*.

If you experience five or more of these symptoms for more than two weeks, or if any of these symptoms interfere with work or family activities, contact your doctor for a thorough examination. This includes a complete physical exam and a review of your family's history of illness. Do not try to diagnose yourself. Only a health care professional can determine if you have depression.

Bipolar Disorder

More than a Mood Swing

Bipolar disorder is a treatable medical illness marked by extreme changes in mood, thought, energy and behavior. It is also known as *manic depression* because a person's mood can alternate between *mania* and *depression*. This change in mood (or "mood swing") can last for hours, days, weeks or even months.

How to Recognize Mania

Unlike people with depression, most people with bipolar disorder talk about experiencing the "highs" and "lows" of the illness. The "highs" are periods of mania or intense bursts of energy or euphoria, which include some or all of the following symptoms:

- Increased physical and mental activity and energy
- Heightened mood, exaggerated optimism and self-confidence
- Excessive irritability, aggressive behavior
- Decreased need for sleep without experiencing fatigue
- Grandiose delusions, inflated sense of self-importance
- Racing speech, racing thoughts, flight of ideas
- Impulsiveness, poor judgment, distractibility
- Reckless behavior such as spending sprees, rash business decisions, erratic driving and sexual indiscretions
- In the most severe cases, delusions and hallucinations

Bipolar disorder affects close to six million American adults. Like depression and other serious illnesses, bipolar disorder can also have an impact on spouses, family members, friends and coworkers. It usually begins in late adolescence (often appearing as depression during teen years), although it can start in early childhood or as late as the 40s and 50s. An equal number of men and women develop this illness, and it is found among all ages, races, ethnic groups and social classes. The illness tends to run in families.

Mood swings that come with bipolar disorder can be severe, ranging from extremes in energy to deep despair. The severity of the mood swings and the way they disrupt normal activities are what make bipolar mood episodes different from ordinary mood changes.



Treatment

Sometimes it's hard to ask for help. If you or someone you know has a mood disorder, you may be feeling especially vulnerable, and talking to someone about it may be the last thing you want to do. But finding the right treatment is the first step in becoming an active manager of an illness like depression or bipolar disorder. Finding the right treatment starts with finding the right mental health professional.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy or “talk therapy” is an important part of treatment for many people. It can sometimes work alone in cases of mild to moderate depression. A good therapist can help you modify behavioral or emotional patterns that contribute to your illness. People with bipolar disorder and/or chronic depression usually benefit from a combination of medication and talk therapy.

Medication

The choice to take medication is entirely yours, but know that many people with mood disorders have significantly improved their lives because they've followed a treatment plan that includes medication. Though medication does not guarantee that all your problems will be solved, the right one can improve your ability to cope with life's problems and restore your sense of judgment.

Alternative Treatments

DBSA recognizes that dietary supplements and other alternative treatments that are advertised to have a positive effect on depression or bipolar disorder regularly enter the marketplace. DBSA does not endorse or discourage the use of these treatments. However, be aware that alternative treatments may have side effects or interact with prescribed medications, so read labels carefully and discuss them with your doctor or pharmacist before taking them.

Living with Depression or Bipolar Disorder

As with other chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease or asthma, people with mood disorders should see themselves as managers of their illness. Depression and bipolar disorder are *treatable*, but they are not yet curable. For many people, depression and bipolar disorder are chronic illnesses. If severe depressive and/or manic episodes reappear at some point in your life, don't panic. Your experience with previous episodes puts you one giant step ahead in the process of recognizing symptoms and getting help. By continuing your treatment plan, you can greatly reduce your chances of having symptoms recur.

The Value of DBSA Support Groups

Along with proper diagnosis and treatment, the support of others is vital to a lifetime of wellness. DBSA's grassroots network of nearly 400 chapters offer over 1,000 peer-led support groups across the United States, so that no one with depression or bipolar disorder needs to feel alone. The support groups are volunteer-facilitated and provide people living with depression or bipolar disorder the opportunity to find comfort and direction in a confidential and supportive setting. Participants report that DBSA support groups

- Give you the opportunity to reach out to others and benefit from the experience of those who have “been there.”
- Motivate you to follow your treatment/wellness plan.
- Help you understand that a mood disorder does not define who you are.
- Help you rediscover strengths and humor you may have thought you had lost.
- Provide a forum for mutual acceptance, understanding and self-discovery.

Take the next step toward wellness for you or someone you love. Visit www.DBSAAlliance.org/findsupport or call (800) 826-3632 to find the group nearest you. If there's not a support group in your community, DBSA can help you start one.

Become a Friend of DBSA

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Questions? Call (800) 826-3632 or (312) 642-0049.

Fax credit card payments (VISA, MasterCard, Discover or AmEx) to (312) 642-7243.

Make secure online donations at www.DBSAlliance.org.

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Suicide Prevention

If you are having suicidal thoughts, it is important to recognize these thoughts for what they are: expressions of a treatable medical illness. Don't let embarrassment stand in the way of vital communication with your doctor, family and friends; **take immediate action**. You can take important first steps to manage these symptoms.

- Tell your mental health professional immediately.
- Tell a trusted family member, friend or other support person.
- Regularly schedule health care appointments.
- Instruct a close supporter to take your credit cards, checkbook and car keys when suicidal feelings become persistent.
- Make sure guns, other weapons and old medications are not available.
- Keep pictures of your favorite people visible at all times.
- For help in a crisis, call the National Hopeline Network at (800) 442-HOPE.

Develop a Wellness Lifestyle

Keep the following in mind as you discover your own ways to reduce symptoms and maintain wellness:

- Regularly talk to your counselor, doctor or other health care professional.
- Share talking and listening time with a friend.
- Do exercises that help you relax, focus and reduce stress.
- Participate in fun, affirming and creative activities.
- Record your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Create a daily planning calendar.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Allow yourself to be exposed to light.
- Improve your diet. Avoid caffeine, sugar and heavily salted foods.
- Change the stimulation in your environment.
- Attend a local DBSA support group regularly.