



# Is it Just a Mood... or Something Else?

Information  
on mood  
disorders for  
young people

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We've been there.  
We can help.

National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association

## What's going on?

Take a look at the lists below and check the things that describe your thoughts, feelings or actions, now or recently.

- Sadness that won't go away
- Anger or irritability
- Changes in your appetite—eating more or eating less
- Hard time sleeping or sleeping too much
- Less energy; feeling exhausted or burned-out
- Hard time making decisions
- Guilt, feelings of worthlessness
- Headache, upset stomach or other physical pain that doesn't seem to have a physical cause
- Not able to enjoy things you once liked
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Thinking about hurting yourself
- Thinking about dying or killing yourself. *If you are thinking about hurting yourself in any way, tell someone right away. There is more about suicide on page 8.*

- Really good, or better-than-good mood
- Feeling all-powerful, very confident, like you can do anything
- Less need for sleep
- Big plans, big ideas, lots of projects
- Aggressiveness, short temper, rage
- Fast thoughts, feeling like you can't shut off your mind
- Can't stop talking
- Restless, like jumping out of your skin
- Making spur-of-the-moment or bad decisions
- Mind bouncing from one thought to another
- Fast driving, spending a lot of money, having unsafe sex
- Feeling like people are out to get you
- Seeing or hearing things others say aren't there

The first list describes symptoms of depression. The second describes symptoms of mania. If you checked five or more items from the first list or three or more items from the second list, you may have depression or manic depression (now known as bipolar disorder). This doesn't mean you're crazy, weird or a bad person. Depression and bipolar disorder are medical illnesses that can be treated. This brochure was written to tell you about these illnesses and what you can do to feel better. Don't try to diagnose yourself. Only a doctor can tell if you have depression or bipolar disorder.

## What is depression?

***I don't want to go to school or see my friends or anything. I just hate everybody right now. I feel lousy and worthless. My life sucks.***

Everyone has good days and bad days, ups and downs. School, parents and relationships can be confusing and frustrating. Things can be great one minute, awful the next. This can feel overwhelming.

Everyday sadness can be caused by a loss or a major life change, such as the death of someone you care about, a break-up of a relationship, or the divorce of your parents. But if this unhappiness lasts for more than two weeks and starts to interfere with your life, it might be something more serious.

When people talk about feeling "depressed," they might mean they're having a bad day, or they might be talking about clinical depression. The difference between having a bad day and clinical depression is:



- **How intense the mood is:** Depression is more intense than a bad mood.
- **How long it lasts:** A bad mood is usually gone in a few days, but clinical depression lasts two weeks or longer.
- **How much it interferes with your life:** A bad mood does not keep you from going to school or spending time with friends. Depression can keep you from doing these things, and may even make it difficult to get out of bed.



## What is bipolar disorder?

***Last week I felt on top of the world—like I was indestructible. But today I can't even get up. I don't think I'm going to feel like doing anything for a long time.***

People who have bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, usually experience periods of mania, or intense “highs” of energy, (including any or all of the symptoms in the second list on page 2) followed by periods of depression. Symptoms of bipolar disorder, like symptoms of depression, can be different for different people. It's important to tell your doctor all of the symptoms you are having, or have experienced in the past, in order for your doctor to make an accurate diagnosis. Often, people with bipolar disorder are misdiagnosed with depression because they don't report their symptoms of mania.

Symptoms of mania can feel really good for a while, especially if they happen right after you've been feeling depressed. But they can also lead to serious or even life-threatening problems if they cause you to do things that are reckless or impulsive.

## What causes depression and bipolar disorder?

***Why is this happening to me?  
Is it something I did?***

Depression and bipolar disorder are physical illnesses, just like diabetes or asthma. No one would expect to get over diabetes or asthma by “trying harder” or “snapping out of it.”

Researchers believe that depression and bipolar disorder are caused by an imbalance in brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Depression and bipolar disorder can also be brought on by other medical illnesses, medications you may be taking, a change in health habits, stress, hormonal changes, or drug or alcohol use. You can't catch these illnesses from someone else and they are not caused by being a “bad person” or having a “bad parent.” They do run in families, though, so if someone else in your family has one of these illnesses, you might be more likely to have one, too.

Anyone can get depression or bipolar disorder—people of all ages and all races from all walks of life. About one in ten people will experience some form of depression or bipolar disorder between the ages of 13 and 19, so if you have one of these illnesses, you are not alone.

It's smart to seek help as soon as possible, because the earlier you get treatment, the more likely it is that you will be able to successfully manage your depression or bipolar disorder throughout your life.





## How can I find help?

***I'm afraid my parents will yell at me and tell me it's my fault. And no one else knows about this... I don't want them to think I'm nuts.***

There are a lot of people who can support you in finding help. If your parents ask you what's wrong, tell them. Often, parents are concerned about you and really want to help.

If you don't feel you can talk to your parents, tell another adult

you trust, such as:

- Another family member—an older brother or sister, aunt, uncle, grandparent
- Another trusted adult—a neighbor or a friend's parent
- A teacher, school counselor or other adult at school
- Your family doctor
- A member of the clergy or another person at your place of worship
- Someone working at a phone crisis line, helpline or neighborhood drop-in center

It's not shameful to have an illness that affects your thoughts and behaviors. Hiding your symptoms, or ignoring them and hoping they'll go away, can make things worse. You can get better, but it takes treatment, not just "willpower."

## What's treatment like?

***I hated medication at first. It didn't take effect overnight, either. It was more gradual, like one day I was listening to music and enjoying it, and I realized, hey, I haven't had a miserable thought in like, hours, and I wasn't even trying not to! I like the way I feel now much better.***

There are many safe, effective treatments for both depression and bipolar disorder. People with these illnesses usually are helped by three things: medication, counseling (talk therapy) and support from people such as a DMDA group. Although the moral support of friends and family can be very helpful, talking with them is not enough to treat depression or bipolar disorder.

It's important to see a doctor who can make a diagnosis and put together a treatment plan that's right for you. Your doctor may suggest psychotherapy or "talk therapy," which can sometimes treat depression by itself. A good therapist can help you deal with the feelings you are having and help you find your way out of depression. Your doctor may also prescribe medication. Medications called antidepressants are prescribed for depression and mood stabilizers are used to treat bipolar disorder. These medications do not cause "highs" or artificial happiness, do not change your personality, are not habit forming and don't "space people out." They help return you to a stable, comfortable mood. They help you be you.

Sometimes people have to try more than one treatment before they find the right one. It may take a combination of medications to help you feel better. Don't get discouraged. You and your doctor will find the treatment that's right for you.

You may see ads on TV, in newspapers or magazines, or on the internet for "natural" or "herbal" treatments for depression or bipolar disorder. Not a lot of research has been done on these treatments and unfortunately, natural does not always mean safe. If you would like to try a natural remedy, talk to your doctor first. It's very important not to take any additional pills or supplements, change your dose, or stop taking your medication without talking to your doctor about it.

## What if I feel like killing myself? What can I do?

***Two years ago I tried to kill myself. My mother found me and took me to the hospital. At first I was really mad that she hadn't let me die, but now that I've been working on getting better for awhile, I'm really glad to still be here.***

The feelings that cause a person to think about suicide are caused by the person's illness. Suicide is a *permanent* solution to a temporary problem. Don't be afraid to talk about these feelings. They are real, not a sign of weakness. With the right help, you can begin to feel better.

Some things you can do if you're thinking about suicide:

- Tell someone right away.
- Develop a plan to make sure you're not by yourself, with the help of your family and/or friends.
- Don't use alcohol and/or drugs.
- Ask your parents to lock up any guns or other dangerous items in the house. Throw away all medications you are no longer taking.
- Depression and bipolar disorder can cause your mind to focus only on the bad things. Remember that this is part of your illness—it's not who you are and it's not the way things will always be.
- Have regularly scheduled health care appointments and keep them.
- Keep pictures of your favorite people with you or where you can see them at all times to remind you they are there for you.
- If you can, get involved in things you like to do. If you can't, then just spend time with family and friends, even if you are only doing something quiet like watching TV, going to a movie or reading with someone else in the room.
- If you drive, be sure a friend or family member knows to take away your car keys when you are feeling suicidal.
- Talk about how you're feeling. At a DMDA support group, you can meet other people who may have been through some of the same things you have. (There's more about support groups on page 10.)

## How can I help a family member or friend?

***My best friend has been acting so bizarre lately. Now she's really scaring me because yesterday she said this world would be better off without her.***

If you think someone you know has symptoms of depression or bipolar disorder:

- Encourage them to seek help from their doctor, a school counselor, or another type of counselor or social worker. You might want to offer to go with them to their first appointment.
- Learn all you can about depression and bipolar disorder. You might be that person's only source of information about mood disorders.
- Let them know you care. Remind them that they shouldn't feel ashamed or guilty. Avoid telling them things like, "Snap out of it." Let them know their feelings are caused by an illness that can be treated.
- Invite them out. Realize they might not want to go at first. If they say no, ask them again later, or offer to stay in and spend time with them.
- If you are worried they might be suicidal, ask them, and help them get help. A straightforward, caring question about suicide will not cause someone to start having suicidal thoughts. If they are thinking of suicide, don't promise secrecy. Tell someone you trust immediately.
- Talk to them about attending a DMDA support group meeting. It can help them to learn that they are not alone.
- Make sure they do not have access to things that can cause injury, like knives, guns, alcohol or drugs.
- DO NOT take responsibility for making your friend or family member well. You are not a therapist.
- If the person is in immediate danger, call 911.

## What are support groups like?

***I'm really grateful for my DMDA group. Even though a lot of people there are older than me, they actually understand, which is more than I can say for most of the people at my high school.***

National DMDA has 800 support groups across the country. Each is a place where people can share their feelings, ask questions, talk about coping skills and find strength. By sharing your experiences, you can help others, too. Support group members are people with mood disorders and their families. Each group has a professional advisor and an appointed group leader. DMDA groups help people remember they are not alone, and can also help them stick with their treatment plans. Call (800) 826-3632 or visit [www.ndmda.org](http://www.ndmda.org) to find a support group near you. If there is no group in your area, we can help you start one.

## Never give up hope

If you are having mood swings that worry you, find out if you have depression or bipolar disorder. These illnesses are treatable, and you can feel better. Your symptoms are nothing to be ashamed of, and the best thing you can do for yourself is get help. Always remember that you are not alone, and by working with your doctor, you can find a treatment that helps you.

### **A note to parents:**

Watching a child go through an episode of depression or mania is painful for parents, too. Often, children will refuse help or insist that parents don't understand. Parents, too, may be told their children will "snap out of it" or "need more discipline." With a medical illness such as depression or bipolar disorder, however, treatment—whether it's talk therapy, medication, or another method you and your child's doctor choose—is the most important thing. It's also helpful to get support for yourself from other parents who can share their experiences and help you as your family journeys through treatment. Attend a DMDA support group in your area, or see page 11 for other organizations that can help.

## Resources

These well-regarded organizations also offer information about depression or bipolar disorder. They are not affiliated with National DMDA and National DMDA is not responsible for the content or accuracy of the material they provide.

### **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**

(202) 966-7300 • [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

(888) 333-2377 • [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

### **Center for Mental Health Services**

(800) 789-2647 • [www.mentalhealth.org](http://www.mentalhealth.org)

### **Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation**

(847) 256-8525 • [www.bpkids.org](http://www.bpkids.org)

### **Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health**

(703) 684-7710 • [www.ffcmh.org](http://www.ffcmh.org)

### **Focus Adolescent Services - An Internet Clearinghouse of Information, Resources, and Support**

(877) FOCUS-AS (877-362-8727) • [www.focusas.com](http://www.focusas.com)

### **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)**

(800) 950-6264 • [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

### **National Hopeline Network**

(800) SUICIDE (800-784-2433)

### **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

(301) 443-4513 • [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

### **National Mental Health Association (NMHA)**

(800) 969-6642 • [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

You may also want to check major internet search engines for groups, clubs or chats related to young people and depression or bipolar disorder. Remember that your treatment decisions should be made only by you and your doctor, and your decisions should be based on correct information from reputable sources such as the ones listed above. While others’ experiences can provide a lot of hope and support, everyone is different, and each person recovers in his or her own way. “Miracle” or “instant” cures will not take the place of a good treatment plan.

**NATIONAL**



**We've been there.  
We can help.**

**THE MISSION** of the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association (National DMDA) is to educate patients, families, professionals and the public concerning the nature of depressive and manic-depressive illnesses as *treatable* medical diseases; to foster self-help for patients and families; to eliminate discrimination and stigma; to improve access to care; and to advocate for research toward the elimination of these illnesses.

### **National DMDA: Your Resource for Education and Support**

The National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association is the nation's largest patient-directed, illness-specific organization. Incorporated in 1986 and headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, National DMDA has a worldwide grassroots network of more than 800 support groups. It is guided by a 65-member Scientific Advisory Board comprised of the leading researchers and clinicians in the field of mood disorders.

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Fax: (312) 642-7243  
Website: [www.ndmda.org](http://www.ndmda.org)

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

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National DMDA does not endorse or recommend the use of any specific treatment or medication for mood disorders. For advice about specific treatments or medications, individuals should consult their physicians and/or mental health professionals.