

Manic depression

What is manic depression?

Some people have an illness that causes their general mood to change over weeks, or months. They go between being very high (manic) and very low (depression). They are therefore said to suffer from 'manic depression'. Some health workers also call this 'bipolar disorder' because of the swings between the two (bi) extremes (poles).

If not treated, this illness disrupts the lives of the person and those around them, but this does not mean that people who have manic depression cannot live successful lives. Some famous people are thought to have had manic depression. For example, the painter Vincent van Gogh, the writer Virginia Woolf, actresses Vivien Leigh and Frances Farmer, and US president Abraham Lincoln.

If you are affected by this condition, or know someone who is, the following information may help you understand and cope better.

What is it like?

People with manic depression can experience extremes of mood that do not fit with what is happening in their life. They may, for example, be happy, energetic and carefree although things are going badly. Or they may be very sad even though lots of good things are happening.

There are usually times of normal happiness and sadness between the times of feeling manic or depressed. How long each of these times lasts will be different. Some people are up and down three or four times a year, but some only a few times in their whole lives.

Mood changes vary from mild to severe and bad episodes may need hospital treatment. However, the changes come on slowly, giving the person and people who know them, time to spot what is about to happen. This is important because treatment works best if started early. The right medication can reduce, or even prevent, more illness.

What causes manic depression?

No one knows for sure. It affects about one in a hundred people, men and women equally. But it is known that:

- People are more likely to get this illness if a family member has it (but just because one person has, does not mean that all the other family members will get it).
- People with this illness seem to have a disturbance of the chemicals in the brain.

- Stressful events can bring it on if the person is likely to suffer from manic depression, but stress by itself does not cause it.

What can be done to help?

Medication from a doctor is most helpful, especially if taken early. Very few people go high or low overnight, so you will usually have time to notice a mood swing developing. ***Get medical help as soon as you notice changes. The longer you leave it, the harder it will be to control.***

Think back to when you were last depressed. You probably felt some of the things listed below. Tick which you felt, and write in any others that you remember. This will help you spot when you are starting to feel depressed.

My signs of beginning to feel depressed are:

Tiredness	
Poor concentration	
Loss of self confidence	
Cutting myself off from other people	
Changes of appetite	
Suicidal thoughts	
Feeling sad or guilty	
Waking early	
Feeling anxious	
Lack of interest in things I usually enjoy	
Other things:	

Now think about when you last felt manic. Do the same with the list below to help you spot when you are starting to feel manic.

My signs of beginning to feel manic are:

Feeling unusually excited, happy, positive or confident	
Being easily annoyed if others don't share my excitement and ideas	
Sleeping badly and waking early	
Poor concentration	
Being easily distracted	
Talking quickly	
Acting recklessly	
Being rude to other people	
Having more interest in sex	
Having 'big ideas'	
Other things:	

Is there anything else that can help?

People have found the following helpful to cope with the manic times:

- Do your best to remain calm and relaxed.
- Do your best to avoid, or reduce, drinking tea, coffee, cola, or other drinks that contain caffeine.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Ask people around you try to ignore silly jokes or comments you may make.
- Avoid arguments.
- Learn some relaxation techniques. Some relaxation exercises are set out at the end of this leaflet.
- At night, lie down and relax even if you cannot sleep.
- Play solo card games such as Patience.
- Don't take any drugs not prescribed by a doctor.
- Sort out any problems that are worrying you — think about all possible ways of solving the problem and what the good and bad points of each possible solution are. Then decide which solution is best. Having decided, write down how you will put the solution into action. Afterwards, check out how well the solution worked. Try another if the first solution did not work.
- Exercise can help you cope with stress.

- Find ways to be active for short times, if you possibly can. If you are stopped from being active when feeling manic you may get frustrated. Set clear limits so you do not get carried away.
- Avoid making important decisions about your life while you are unwell.
- Try not to take yourself too seriously. If you feel excited, remember that you do not have to save the world today! Take time to unwind and be kind to yourself.

Further help and information

Contact The Manic Depression Fellowship, 8–10 High Street, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT1 1EY (Tel: 020 8974 6550), or The Manic Depression Fellowship (Scotland), 7 Woodside Crescent, Glasgow G37UL (Tel: 0141 331 0344). They provide advice, support and a publications list for people with manic depressive illness.

The library may be able to get the following books for you:

Inside Out: A Guide to Self-Management of Manic Depression Manic Depression Fellowship, 1995

Living without Depression and Manic Depression: A Workbook for Maintaining Mood Stability Mary-Ellen Copeland. New Harbinger Press (USA)

How to practise relaxation

There are two main ways to relax — meditation and relaxation — and they both take practice. Try them to see which you prefer. Then practise for about 20 minutes every day. You will need to find somewhere quiet where you will not be disturbed.

Meditation: In meditation or yoga the body is calmed by focusing your mind. It is best to find someone to teach you, but if you cannot, try this simple meditation:

1. Sit on a chair or bed, keeping your back straight, with your hands in your lap.
2. Close your eyes and breathe slowly through your nostrils.
3. *Feel* the air as it flows in and out of your nose and *listen* to the sound.
4. Keep as still as you can until the time is up.
5. If your thoughts wander, just bring them back to your nose.

Relaxation: Teaching your muscles to relax. You will need that quiet place and time, and somewhere to sit.

First, practise slow breathing for a few minutes. As you breathe out imagine the tension flowing out of your body.

Second, try to think only about what you are doing. If worries drift into your mind while you are relaxing, don't try to stop them, just let them float gently across and out of your mind without reacting to them.

Third, relax the muscles of your body, as listed below. Do this by tensing them for 7–10 seconds, then relax them for 10 seconds. Don't tense the muscles so hard it hurts, and don't *try* to relax — just stop tensing and let the muscles relax themselves. The order of relaxing is: hands, head, body, legs, like this:

6. Hands: Clench one fist, then relax. Then do the other hand.
7. Lower arms: Bend your hands down at the wrist, as if trying to touch the underside of your arms, then relax.
8. Upper arms: Bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension in your upper arms, then relax.
9. Shoulders: Lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax.
10. Neck: Stretch your neck gently to the left, then let your head fall forward, then stretch it to the right, in a slow rolling motion, then relax.
11. Forehead: Raise your eyebrows, then relax.
12. Eyes: Screw up your eyes, then relax.
13. Jaw: Clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then relax.
14. Tongue: Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax.
15. Chest: Breathe in deeply, hold it, then breath out and relax.
16. Stomach: Push your tummy in to tighten the muscle, then relax.
17. Upper back: Pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax.
18. Lower back: Lean your head and upper back forward, curving your back and tensing the lower back, then relax.
19. Buttocks: Tighten your buttocks, then relax.
20. Thighs: Push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax.
21. Calves: Lift your toes off the ground, then relax.
22. Feet: Gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then relax.

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes enjoying the feeling of relaxation. At other times, try relaxing muscles when you notice they are tense.

This leaflet is adapted with permission from: Health Public Affairs, Dept of Health, NSW. *Living with Mood Swings - Manic Depressive Illness*. State Health Publication no (HP) 86-027; and Falloon IR & Hole V, 1990, *How is a Manic Episode Treated?* Buckingham Mental Health Service, quoted in Andrews G & Jenkins R (Eds), 1999, *Managing Mental Disorders (UK Edition)*, Sydney: World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse.