

What are the warning signs before a new episode in bipolar I disorder?



Warning signs are symptoms that happen before a new episode (sometimes called 'prodromes'). They are not usually serious, but are noticeable compared to how a person feels normally, causing small differences in the way they feel or act. Sometimes other people may notice them before the person feeling them does. This is why it is important to have a close friend, relative, partner or another trustworthy person who can act as your "mood barometer."

Every person will have their own set of warning signs unique to them. Learning to recognise warning signs is useful because by acting quickly, steps can be taken to help prevent a potential episode. Keeping a mood diary can be helpful for identifying warning signs and the situations that are stressful and might trigger them, like for example, problems at work, arguments with family members, or after a relationship has ended.

Warning signs

Warning signs are symptoms that happen before an episode. They are usually mild, but will be noticeable compared to how a person feels normally. Every person will have their own set of warning signs, and it is important for them to learn to recognise them.

The **warning signs of mania** are not always recognised, simply because most of the time people do not think there is a problem when they are feeling well. Symptoms like not wanting to sleep (e.g. sleeping for two hours less than usual and not feeling tired) and being full of energy are common warning signs of mania that are easy to spot. However, other warning signs, like feeling self-important or talking quickly, may be difficult for a person to spot on their own, and are most often picked up by others. Things like spending a lot of money will also generally be noticed first by friends and family who are concerned by sudden changes in behaviour.

When warning signs of mania occur in a person who has experienced **mania with depressive symptoms** in the past, it is important to look for depressive warning symptoms as quickly as possible so that the most appropriate treatment can be given. Excessive worrying and irritability are often felt by a person before they have an episode of mania with depressive symptoms. Feeling full of energy, then low in energy over a short period of time or in the same day, is another common warning sign. A person may also start getting out of bed later than usual or be more argumentative with their partner and close ones.

The warning signs of depression are often easier to pick up

People usually start losing interest in seeing people or doing things they normally like doing. They may also care less about their personal hygiene - a person may wear the same clothes for days and find taking care of themselves more difficult than usual, because they feel tired or have no energy. Insomnia is also common.

Like **mania with depressive symptoms**, when warning signs of depression occur in a person who has experienced **depression with manic symptoms**, it is important to identify if there are also any warning signs of mania.

Common warning signs of mania (or hypomania)

- Not wanting to sleep
 - Feeling full of energy
 - Racing thoughts
 - Feeling self-important
 - Not being able to concentrate
 - Talking quickly
 - Spending lots of money on expensive things
 - Feeling irritable*
 - Feeling agitated*
 - Feeling anxious*
 - Feeling full of energy and then low on energy in the same day*
 - Getting out of bed later than usual*
- * Any of these symptoms can be a warning sign for an episode of mania with depressive symptoms

Common warning signs of depression

- Having no interest in doing things or seeing people
- Wearing the same clothes for days and not caring about hygiene
- Having no energy
- Not being able to concentrate
- Feeling increasingly down
- Having insomnia
- Having negative thoughts
- Worrying more than usual

How to deal with warning signs

If a person starts experiencing any of these warning signs, they should **contact their psychiatrist immediately**, and arrange an appointment within 2-3 days (no more than one week later).

The psychiatrist will then advise on whether they think the symptoms are because of a new episode, and if so, prescribe medications or adjust the existing treatment to prevent manic and/or depressive symptoms from occurring.

When a person experiences irritability or anxiety, avoiding stressful situations and trying to do more relaxing things can help them feel better. Knowing things that cause stress and learning how to relax is not always easy, and should be thought about when a person feels well. Because individuals respond differently to stress, it can be useful to think about levels of stress, and how much stress it takes to make a certain person feel unwell.

Thinking about stress in terms of being like a balloon can make this easier – as stress builds, the **balloon** gets bigger until an episode occurs and the balloon finally bursts.

How big the balloon can get depends on the individual person and how they feel at the time. When a person is experiencing warning signs, they may not be able to cope with as much stress as they usually do (the balloon becomes more likely to burst when it is smaller). Avoiding stressful situations while they are feeling this way can help stop the balloon from filling up.

Engaging in relaxing activities, getting enough sleep and eating healthily can also help – like putting little holes in the balloon, helping to lower stress levels.

Warning signs action plan

If warning signs are suspected, following these simple steps can help prevent a new episode from occurring:

- 1. Discuss with a trusted person current mood and possible warning signs**
- 2. Arrange an appointment with a psychiatrist as soon as possible (no more than one week later)**
- 3. Take medications as prescribed**
- 4. Avoid stressful situations**
- 5. Engage in relaxing activities, sleep regularly and eat healthily**