

Cyclothymic Mood

Cyclothymia is a Greek word which means cycles of mood. In this condition, mood goes up and down throughout a person's life. Cyclothymia can occur alone or with other mood disorders.

When it occurs alone, cyclothymia causes people to have brief mood swings that last days to weeks. The moods they can cycle through include:

Depression: feeling down, sad, unmotivated, fatigued, self-critical, hopeless. In this state people usually want to be alone, stay in bed, and may crave carbohydrates.

Dark Hypomania: irritable, edgy, impulsive, anxious, distracted, dissatisfied, trouble sleeping. In this state people may act recklessly or self-medicate with drugs, alcohol or nicotine.

Bright Hypomania: energized, happy or euphoric, filled with plans or creative ideas, talkative and outgoing, not needing much sleep. In this state people may be very productive and charismatic, spreading their excitement to others. Many things about bright hypomania are desirable. On the negative side, its overconfidence may lead to unwise decisions and the hyper-energized state may cause conflict with others.

Euthymia: this means "normal mood", which is different from "normal emotion." In fact, there is no such thing as a "normal emotion" – all emotions are possible and healthy as we respond to the joys, sorrows and anxieties that life brings. Normal mood simply means that the basic functions of your body and mind keep steady even when emotions get bumpy. The basic functions of mood include:

Sleep, appetite, motivation, self-image, energy, judgment, concentration, and rate of thought and speech.

When these are stable, you have a rock to stand on as your emotions rise and fall, and from this place you can see life in perspective.

One of the hard parts of living with cyclothymia is that even during a normal mood you may still have anxiety because you never know when it's going to swing again. Mood swings make it hard to know what to trust. They also make it hard to learn coping skills. Most people only have to learn how to deal with stress during one mood: euthymia. People with cyclothymia have to learn how to deal with stress during 3-4 different moods, and each mood requires different skills. Therapy tends to be particularly beneficial for this aspect of cyclothymia.

People with cyclothymia often have another mood disorder such as bipolar-I or bipolar-II. That would be the case if there are episodes of major depression or mania along with a life-long pattern of frequent ups and downs in mood. The occurrence of cyclothymia with bipolar-II is so common that researchers have a term for it: bipolar-II ½.

Potential Strengths:

Broad interests and experiences, spontaneous, creative, lively, skeptical. Able to relate to many kinds of people. Sometimes your ideas are great, your emotions deep and your sensations vivid. This can lead to powerful insights and artistic creations.

Potential Limitations:

Unpredictable moods including anxiety, depression, irritability, insomnia and energetic happiness. The changes in mood make it hard to maintain perspective. You may feel confident one day, hopeless and insecure the next. Decisions may be impulsive, including relationships, shopping and jobs. While you can start things easily it can be hard to follow through with them. Some people with cyclothymia hide the darker shades of their mood, which can make them feel like no one really knows them.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 1/25/2015