

Mixed States

1 in 4 people with depression have anxious, agitated, or irritable symptoms that can change their response to treatment



Depression is a low energy state, but it can also overlap with elevations in mental energy in what psychiatrists call a mixed state. Though long-known as part of bipolar disorder, new research shows that mixed states are common in non-bipolar depression as well. 1 in 4 people with non-bipolar depression have them, and in 2013 a new diagnosis was developed to identify them: *Depression with Mixed Features*.

Unfortunately, the ups and downs in energy do not cancel each other out. They are like shocks surging through the nerves – and often create a tense, painful state as they pull in opposite directions. It can feel like ADHD, anxiety, or irritability. People feel “tired and wired... restless... driven to do something but I don’t know what to do.”

Mixed states are caused by an overlap of depressive (=low energy) and hypomanic (=high energy) symptoms. The chart on the back describes up symptoms in more detail. Each mixed state is unique because there are so many ways that the hypomanic can overlap with depression, and you only need three of them to have a mixed state. Often the depressive symptoms are worse in the morning and the hypomanic ones come on at night, but there are many variations.

Mixed states are important to recognize because they help predict how people will respond to medications. Many – but not all – patients with mixed states can get worse on antidepressants and may need a mood stabilizer if they take medication for depression.

They also tell us about what types of lifestyle changes will help your mood. Regular sleep and wake times, darkness at night, and avoiding substances of abuse are particularly important. Read more about novel ways to reduce evening light at: chrisaikenmd.com/darktherapy

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 10/4/2024

Mixed States: The Hypomanic Symptoms

If you have 3 or more of the symptoms below during a depression, you might be having a mixed state.

High energy	An uncomfortable, anxious energy that feels “wired, restless, crawling out of my skin.”
Mood swings	Emotions swing rapidly from one to another (irritable, sad, anxious, despairing, and – rarely – giddy or happy).
Irritable	Angry, impatient, reactive, short-fuse, feeling people have it out for you, starting arguments or isolating oneself to avoid them.
Hyperactive	Pacing from room to room without a clear purpose, agitated, tense, going on random walks or drives.
Impulsive	Reckless, destructive actions (suddenly leaving relationships or jobs, breaking things, aggressive driving). Sometimes pleasure is pursued impulsively, in which case it feels like a desperate attempt to relieve the depression (overspending through “retail therapy,” binge eating, addictions, pornography).
Decreased sleep	Sleep is random; you may be up all night and sleep during the day. When the amount of sleep is decreased you’ll still feel like you need it, in part because sleep offers some relief from the terrible anxiety of a mixed state.
Increased confidence	You probably won’t feel too good about yourself, but may come across as demanding, pushy, or stubborn to others.
Distracted	Changing tasks frequently, disorganized, hard to think, thoughts shift from one anxious topic to another.
Racing thoughts	Your mind is crowded with depressive or anxious thoughts, imagining the worst-case-scenario. It’s hard to shut your mind off, particularly at night.
Rapid or pressured speech	There’s an urgent, emotional tone to your speech.