Depressed Episodes
A diagnosis of bipolar disorder does not always mean that manic or hypomanic behaviors will be manifested in the current illness. There are several types of bipolar disorders in which manic or hypomanic episodes have occurred in the past, but the features of the current episode are purely depressive. This is termed a depressed episode. Treatment of depressed bipolar disorders is similar to treatment of depression, with the exception that pharmacologic treatment adds a mood stabilizer to antidepressant treatment.

Recent studies explain what many clinicians have been struggling with when treating people who are not responsive to antidepressant pharmacotherapy. People who have already been diagnosed with major depression and have these five features—anxiety, experiencing people as unfriendly, family history of bipolar disorder, a recent diagnosis of depression, and legal problems—may very well have bipolar disorder as opposed to depression. The probability that these features predict bipolar disorder risk in those unsuccessfully treated with antidepressants is high (Perlis, Brown, Baker, & Nierenberg, 2006). Previous research has shown that nearly half of all people who have bipolar disorder are first diagnosed with major depression.

Many clients with bipolar disorder are not correctly diagnosed in a timely manner. This can mean that an individual loses years of his or her life to an illness that could have been successfully managed if correctly diagnosed and treated.

Mixed Episodes
In a mixed episode, symptoms of both mania and depression are present nearly every day in rapidly alternating succession over a period of at least a week. These clients are often agitated, are suffering from insomnia and appetite disturbances, and may exhibit suicidal and psychotic thinking. The presentation also can resemble depression, with a great deal of energy and animation behind the sadness. Clients may have recently had a manic episode or a major depressive episode, although this is not always the case. Because depressive symptoms are part of the clinical picture, clients suffer more psychic pain than do individuals who are in a state of mania, and they may seek help more readily. The Clinical Example that follows illustrates one type of presentation of a mixed episode.