

Bipolar disorder

Information for individuals, partners and families

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health

Bipolar disorder



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Bipolar disorder is a complex illness which can vary a great deal in nature and severity between people.

People with bipolar disorder have problems with their moods, experiencing extreme highs and lows.

If you have bipolar disorder you will experience periods or 'episodes' of highs known as mania or hypomania and usually, periods of depression.

You may also have problems with thinking and perception, which can include symptoms of psychosis. This can include thinking things that are not true (delusions) and seeing or hearing things that are not there (hallucinations).

Research suggests that bipolar disorder runs in families, and genes can influence whether someone develops the illness. We also know that the brain systems involved in controlling our moods work differently in people with bipolar disorder.

Factors such as life stress, lack of sleep and recreational drugs can trigger mood episodes.



Bipolar disorder can cause a great deal of distress, but there is a lot that can be done to stay as well as possible. This includes lifestyle changes, medication and talking treatments.

Getting help

If you think you might have bipolar disorder you should first see your GP who will perform an initial assessment.

Depending upon the outcome of this, your GP will decide whether you need a referral to a primary care mental health worker, your local Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) or another service, depending on your needs.

If you are referred to your local CMHT you will receive a further more detailed assessment, and they will work with you to plan the right treatments for you.

Treatments for bipolar disorder

For many people with bipolar disorder medication is a key part of staying well.

There are a large number of medications that can help. Some work by preventing the extreme highs or lows caused by the condition; these are known as mood stabilisers, and often need to be taken daily for long periods. Other medications may then be used to treat episodes of high or low moods when they happen.

Different medications suit different people, and finding the best medication for an individual can take time, and trials of different medications and doses.

You can find out more about mental health medication at [ncmh.info/medication](https://www.ncmh.info/medication), including how different drugs work, their potential side effects and the way that they interact with other drugs, food and drink.

Talking treatments such as psychoeducation can also be helpful. This approach helps people to understand their illness, learn to recognise early warning signs of highs and lows and develop the skills needed to stay as well as possible.

Bipolar Education Programme Cymru, also known as BEPCymru, is one example. Find out more about this course at ncmh.info/bepcymru.

A combination of medication and psychoeducation is often most effective.

Tips for people with bipolar disorder

- The key things that are known to help in bipolar disorder are medications, education and following the right lifestyle.
- It is crucial to take medication regularly as prescribed stopping and starting suddenly can make things worse.
- There are many medications for bipolar and finding the one that works the best for you can take time – try to be patient.
- Learn as much as you can about the condition and how to stay well. There are many bipolar disorder websites, self-help books and education groups. Find details on some of these at ncmh.info.
- Look after your physical health as well as your mental health. Getting enough sleep, eating healthily, avoiding recreational drugs and moderating your alcohol consumption can all help you to avoid becoming unwell.

- Even if you are well now, you may have more episodes if low or high mood in the future. Try to have a plan in place in case you become unwell again.
- Talk to other people who have bipolar disorder. Their knowledge and experience can be helpful. Organisations such as Bipolar UK (bipolaruk.org.uk) can help you to do this.



- If you have bipolar, are female, and planning a family, you should discuss it with your doctor. There are many important issues to consider around bipolar disorder and pregnancy.
- Try to remember these tips to help you to keep your mood stable:

STABILITY

Sleep... make sure you get enough

Treatment... don't miss taking your medication

Avoid... recreational drugs, and overdoing it with alcohol

Be positive... there is lots you can do to keep well

Intervention... get help sooner rather than later

Lifestyle... follow a regular routine

Inform... yourself and your family about bipolar disorder

Triggers... learn what makes you more likely to relapse

You... can take control of your illness

Tips for families, partners and carers

- A loved one with bipolar disorder may need your help to stay well.

Try to be open and understanding about their condition. Ask them about their concerns and how you can help.

- Talk to the mental health professionals who are looking after them. Don't be afraid to ask questions and for advice.

- Don't assume that every small mood change or disagreement is related to the illness.

- Have a plan for what to do if your relative becomes unwell in the future.

- Learn as much as you can about bipolar disorder and possible treatments. There are useful links included in this leaflet and on ncmh.info, including a list of books on the subject.

- Talk to others who care for people with bipolar disorder. They may have experienced similar situations and have useful tips. Organisations like Bipolar UK (bipolaruk.org.uk) can help you to do this.



Useful websites

NHS Choices

Detailed information on bipolar disorder, including symptoms, treatments and where to get help.

nhs.uk/conditions/bipolar-disorder

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Information on many aspects of bipolar disorder, including downloadable leaflets in several languages.

rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/problemsdisorders/bipolardisorder.aspx

Bipolar Education Programme Cymru

Details on the psychoeducation programme which aims to help people with bipolar to better understand and manage their condition.

ncmh.info/bepc

Bipolar UK

This organisation provides information and advice, and runs support groups and an online community for people with bipolar and their loved ones.

bipolaruk.org.uk

Help with our bipolar disorder research

The National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) is working to better understand bipolar disorder. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for the future.

But to do this we need **your** help.

Helping with our research is quick and painless, and all information we collect is stored confidentially. Taking part involves:

- an informal interview with one of our trained researchers, either at your home or in a local clinic
- providing a small blood or saliva sample
- completing and returning some questionnaires

For more information about our research and how you can help, visit our website (www.ncmh.info) or contact us:



info@ncmh.info



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