

AWARE

**OVERCOMING DEPRESSION.
CHANGING LIVES.**

**LET'S TALK
ABOUT...**

**BIPOLAR
DISORDER**

Helping you with Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder (previously known as manic depression) is a serious illness which can cause you to experience depression lasting weeks or months. This can alternate with bouts of elation; "highs" which can vary in duration. Your mood can otherwise be perfectly normal for months or even years.

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If you experience the elation, but do not have the accompanying depressive episodes, it is still referred to as Bipolar disorder.

The mood-swings of Bipolar disorder are much more intense and prolonged than the typical ups and downs of everyday life. In fact, they disturb your everyday life to a considerable degree.

What Causes Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder affects about 2-3% of the population at any one time with both men and women equally affected. It usually begins between your early teens and forties. The causes are not fully understood but the following factors are known to be involved:



Genetics: Although not directly inherited, if you have a parent with Bipolar disorder, you have a 15% risk of developing it.

Biochemical factors: It is believed to be associated with a chemical imbalance in the brain.

Stress: This may trigger symptoms if you are already predisposed to the disorder.

Alcohol or drugs: These can also trigger symptoms if you are predisposed as can taking steroids and some medicine used for treatment of depression and Parkinson's disease.

Other factors: Very rarely, brain tumours, trauma, haemorrhage, infection or multiple sclerosis, can cause Bipolar disorder by damaging a network of nerve cells in the brain called the limbic system.

Symptoms of Depression

Look out if you have the following for at least 2 weeks

- You've no enjoyment or interest in things that you used to
- You're tired and lack energy

Symptoms of Elation

- You feel 'high' 'on top of the world', 'better than usual' or 'better than ever before'
- You feel unusually angry or irritable
- You have loads of energy and don't need to rest
- You're overactive, restless, and easily distracted
- Your mind is racing and you can't switch off. You feel 'pressure in the head'
- You talk fast and skip from one topic to another
- You have less need for sleep
- You have excessive or unrealistic belief in your abilities
- Your judgment is poor

You may also find you have:

- Increased interest in pleasurable activities: new ventures, sex, alcohol, street drugs, religion, music or art
- Demanding, pushy, insistent, domineering or provocative behaviour, not able to see the changes from your usual self: 'there is nothing wrong with me'
- Delusions (false ideas) or hallucinations (visions or voices) that usually relate to bold ideas about religion, creativity, sex, politics or business



Hypomania

Intense elation rarely goes undiagnosed for long but a less intense form of elation is known as hypomania. This is less apparent and, if you are affected, it often feels like an enjoyable experience. With fewer symptoms of elation it may go unrecognised for years.

"it feels like an enjoyable experience"

How is Bipolar Disorder Treated

If affected you are usually referred to a mental health team by your GP.

A psychiatrist will decide the appropriate treatment for you and support will also be available from other mental health professionals such as a community psychiatric nurse.



Medication

Medication is the main treatment for Bipolar disorder and the mood stabiliser Lithium works for 75% of people. Alternatives are also available and you may need a combination of drugs e.g. antidepressants during the depressed phase or antipsychotic drugs if you have hallucinations or delusions.

After just one episode it's difficult to predict how likely you are to have another, and you may not want to start medication at this stage, unless it was very severe and disruptive to your everyday life. If you have a second episode there is a strong chance of further episodes, so most psychiatrists would recommend a mood stabiliser at this point and it will usually be continued for at least 5 years. You may need to take them for much longer, depending on the severity or frequency of symptoms. Medication doesn't cure Bipolar disorder - it controls the mood swings.

Psychotherapy or Counseling

This may help you come to terms with the illness and provide support and guidance for you and your family. It can help you spot relapses and get help earlier. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) may help with depression. However, psychotherapy does not control or stabilise Bipolar disorder.



What Else To Do

- **Continue your medication as prescribed.** Not doing this is the most common reason for relapse. Never stop or change it without talking to your doctor.
- **Involve your family and people close to you in helping you deal with it.** Give them information so that they know how best to support you.
- **Make a relapse plan.** It's best practice for you to develop your own wellness recovery action plan (WRAP), so you can identify key personal coping strategies that you can use when you feel that you need to.
- **Make a list of contact numbers for key people and organisations** that can help you in an emergency or when you feel you need support.
- **Choose one person who sees you often to help you spot a relapse,** and agree what appropriate action to take with them in advance.
- **Face your fears.** If a relapse occurs, talk it over honestly with those close to you. This can help rebuild relationships if your actions while ill, have caused distress.
- **Keep a healthy life/work balance.** Make time for physical activity, relaxation, fun, and relationships.
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs, or at least stay within safe limits.** Check with your doctor for more information on this.
- **Minimise stress, and learn how to handle it better when it just can't be avoided.**

Self-help Strategies

Learn all you can about the illness and what help is available, such as your community mental health team and AWARE support groups. Learn to spot the early warning signs so you can get help early.

The 5 most evidenced based steps to improving your mental health are:



1. Be Active - Exercise acts as an antidepressant; Research has shown that 50 minutes of brisk walking 4 times a week significantly reduces depression.



2. Take Notice - Savour the moment, be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.



3. Give - Do something nice for a friend or stranger. Smile. Volunteer your time, or consider joining a community group.



4. Connect - With the people around you - family, friends or neighbours. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.



5. Keep learning - Do not be afraid to try something new. Rediscover an old hobby or interest or simply set a challenge you will enjoy.



Do One Thing

Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed when taking steps to help yourself. But remember to focus on doing just one thing at a time. It will help you to reach the goals you set, and get a real sense of achievement.

Who to contact for support



Lifeline

Lifeline is a telephone help and counselling service for anyone in distress or despair. It is available 24/7 and is free to call from your mobile phone.

They can give you immediate support, offer you a face-to-face appointment, or give you information about other services in your area. **Call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000.**

You could also

- See your doctor
- Call the out-of-hours GP service
- Go to the A&E department
- Call emergency services on 999
- Call Samaritans on their freephone helpline 116 123.

This is a confidential service that provides a listening ear to those in distress.

You can read our other guides for more information on help with depression, and looking after your mental health.

Find out how we can help and support you.
Please visit our website or contact us:

Visit: www.aware-ni.org.uk
Email: info@aware-ni.org
Call us: Belfast 028 9035 7820
Derry/L'Derry 028 7126 0602



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