

AWARE

**OVERCOMING DEPRESSION.
CHANGING LIVES.**

LET'S TALK ABOUT

**UNDERSTANDING
BIPOLAR**

Bipolar is a serious illness which can cause you to experience depression lasting weeks or months. This can alternate with bouts of mania/'highs', which can vary in duration. Your mood can otherwise be perfectly normal for months or even years.

If you experience mania but do not have depressive episodes, it is still referred to as bipolar. The mood swings of bipolar are much more intense and prolonged than the typical ups and downs of everyday life and can disturb your everyday life to a considerable degree.

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Key Facts About Bipolar

- ~~~~ 1.3 million people in the UK have bipolar - that is 1 in 50. (Bipolar UK)
- ~~~~ Men and women are equally affected.
- ~~~~ It usually begins between early teens and forties.

What Causes Bipolar?

The causes still need to be fully understood, but the following factors are known to be involved.



1. Genetics

Although not directly inherited, 9% of people who have a close family member with bipolar will develop it themselves.
(Mental Health UK)



2. Biochemical Factors

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



3. Stress

This may trigger symptoms if you are already predisposed to bipolar.



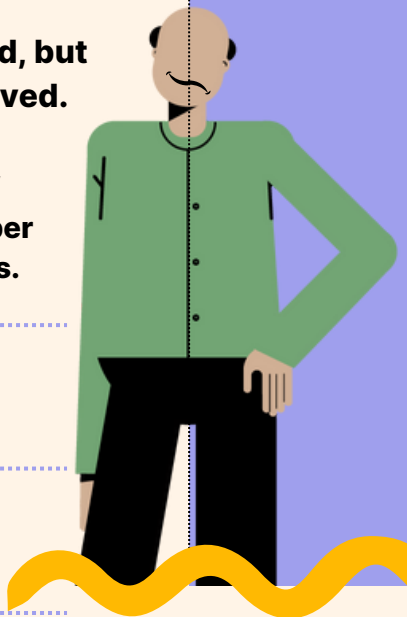
4. Alcohol or Drugs

These can also trigger symptoms if you are predisposed, as can taking steroids and some medicines for depression and Parkinson's disease.



5. Other Factors

Very rarely: brain tumours, trauma, haemorrhage, infection or multiple sclerosis can cause bipolar 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 two weeks:

- No enjoyment or interest in things that you used to.
- Tired and lack of energy despite appropriate rest.

Symptoms of Mania

- Feeling high/on top of the world/better than usual or than before.
- Feeling unusually irritable or angry.
- Loads of energy with no need for rest and less need for sleep.
- Overactive, restless, easily distracted, racing mind.
- Talk quickly and skip between topics.
- Excessive or unrealistic belief in your abilities.
- Poor judgement.
- Increased interest in pleasurable activities: new ventures, sex, alcohol, street drugs, religion, music.
- Demanding, pushy, insistent, domineering or provocative behaviour, not able to see the change from your usual self.
- Delusions or hallucinations that usually relate to bold ideas about religion, sex, politics or business.

Hypomania

Intense mania 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 mania, it may go unrecognised for years.



How is Bipolar 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, and the mood stabiliser Lithium works for 75% of people. Alternatives are available for the other 25%. Individuals may need a combination of drugs, e.g. anti-depressants during the depressed phase or anti-psychotic drugs if hallucinations or delusions are present.

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 is very severe and disruptive. 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. Depending on the severity or frequency of symptoms, some people will need to take them for longer. Medication doesn't cure bipolar - it controls the mood swings.

PSYCHOTHERAPY OR COUNSELLING

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 may help with the depressive side of bipolar. However, psychotherapy does not control or stabilise bipolar.

Other Self-Help Methods

- **Continue your medication as prescribed; never stop or change it without discussing it with your GP.**
- **It is best practice for you to develop your wellness recovery action plan so that you can identify personal coping strategies.**
- **Make a list of key contact numbers of people and organisations who can help you in an emergency or when you need support.**
- **Choose one person who you see often to help you spot signs of relapse and agree on appropriate action to take in advance.**
- **If a relapse occurs, talk honestly with those closest to you - this can help you rebuild relationships if your actions while ill have caused distress.**
- **Keep a healthy work-life balance.**
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs, or stay within safe limits.**
- **Minimise stress and learn coping mechanisms to help you handle stress better.**

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



1. Be Active

Our bodies release feel-good hormones when we're active that can also reduce anxiety and stress, and help us sleep better.



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 loved one 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 reach the goals you set and give you a real sense of achievement.

Who to Contact for Support



Lifeline

A telephone help and counselling service for anyone in distress. It is available 24/7 and free to call.

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

You could also:

- See your GP or 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 - a confidential listening service for those in distress

AWARE NI

You can read our guides for more information on support with bipolar and looking after your mental health.

Contact us by emailing info@aware-ni.org and visit our website at aware-ni.org

AWARE NI also have FREE mental health support groups for anyone aged 18 or over. You can find your nearest one by searching: aware-ni.org/support-groups/

