

Bipolar and Related Disorders

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that causes extreme shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to perform in day-to-day tasks. People with bipolar disorder experience mood swings that include emotional highs (known as manic episodes, or hypomanic episodes in less severe cases) and lows (known as depressive episodes). These mood swings can affect their sleep, energy levels, perception, judgment, behaviours, as well as the ability to think clearly.



Bipolar disorder is typically diagnosed in the teenage years or early adulthood. Symptoms vary across individuals and time. Although bipolar disorder is a lifelong condition, you can manage your mood swings and other symptoms by following a treatment plan. In most cases, bipolar disorder is treated with a combination of medications and psychotherapy.

There are four basic types of bipolar disorder. All involve clear changes in mood, energy, and activity levels, resulting in significant distress and difficulties in life.

- 1. Bipolar I Disorder:** involves periods of severe mood disturbances from manic episodes to depressive episodes.
- 2. Bipolar II Disorder:** involves hypomanic episodes with milder mood elevation, and alternate with periods of depressive episodes.
- 3. Cyclothymic Disorder (or Cyclothymia):** involves periods of hypomanic episodes and periods of depressive symptoms (not as severe as a depressive episode) for at least two years (or one year in children and adolescents).
- 4. Other Specified or Unspecified Bipolar and Related Disorders:** involves bipolar conditions that are induced by substance, alcohol or medical conditions.



What are the Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder?

People with bipolar disorder present drastically different patterns of symptoms when they are in the manic, hypomanic, or depressive episodes.

Manic or Hypomanic Episode

People may experience the following symptoms in a manic or hypomanic episode:

- Elevated or irritable mood
- Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
- Decreased need for sleep
- More talkative or even pressured speech
- Flight of ideas and racing thoughts
- Increased distractibility
- Increase in goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation
- Excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g. *sexual indiscretions, excessive buying, drug abuse*)

Hypomanic episodes can be considered as a milder form of manic episodes. During a hypomanic episode, people can feel very good and be highly productive, with no marked impairment in social or everyday functioning. However, family and friends can still recognize their changes in activities level and mood swings.

Major Depressive Episode

As in major depression, people with bipolar disorder may experience the following symptoms during a depressive episode:

- Persistent low mood
- Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities
- Significant weight loss or weight gain
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Psychomotor agitation or retardation
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate
- Recurrent suicidal ideations

What are the risks of Bipolar Disorder?

People with bipolar disorder are at higher risk for substance use or other forms of dangerous behaviours that lead to personal injury. Their judgment and impulse control ability are usually impaired during manic episodes. They are also at higher risk of suicide. It is important to seek immediate help, call helpline, or go to the hospital if they experience thoughts of suicide.

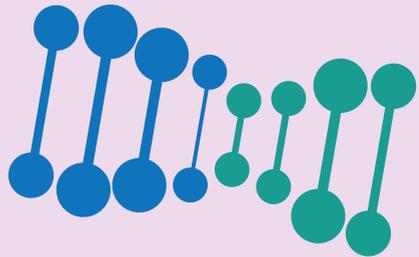
What Causes Bipolar Disorder?

There is no single cause. Scientists and clinicians found the following factors are likely contributing to increased risk for the illness.

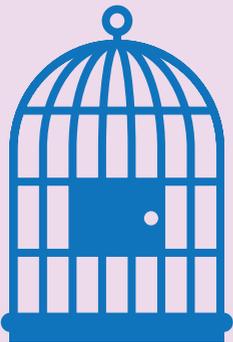
- 1 Abnormal functioning of brain circuits that involve serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine



- 2 Genetic and family history of bipolar disorders



- 3 Environmental stressors



- 4 Disruptions in daily routines such as sleeping, eating, exercising, or socializing with others





Can Bipolar Disorder be treated?

Bipolar disorder is a chronic condition. Manic and depressive episodes usually come back over time. Some people with bipolar disorder are symptom-free between episodes, while some others not. Sometimes, intensive outpatient care or hospitalization is necessary as well. People with bipolar disorder can maintain symptom-free and a stable mood for extended periods with ongoing treatment and self-management.

An effective treatment plan usually includes a combination of medication and psychotherapy. Medications used to treat bipolar disorder generally include mood stabilizers, antidepressants and atypical antipsychotics. Communication with a psychiatrist is crucial to bring out the best treatment effectiveness and manage side effects. Stopping medication without consulting the psychiatrist worsen the symptoms or other potentially dangerous withdrawal effects.

Besides medication, psychological treatments are helpful in providing support, education, and various management skills for people with bipolar disorder and their families. Psychoeducation, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), family-focused interventions, and interpersonal and social rhythm therapy are some of the evidence-based psychotherapies for treating bipolar disorders.



How to support or help a friend with Bipolar Disorder?



- Learn more about the symptoms and treatment options help you keep things in perspective and in a better position to offer assistance
- Watch for warning signs and take swift action to discuss with your friend
- Alert the doctor about what you observe
- Encourage your friend to seek professional help as soon as possible can lead to a better prognosis
- Be understanding and patient in rendering support as the path of recovery may be challenging and take more time than expected

References



American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2014). *Bipolar disorder: assessment and management (NICE Clinical Guideline CG185)*. Retrieved February 19, 2019, from <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg185>

National Institute of Mental Health (2016). *Bipolar Disorder*. Retrieved February 19, 2019, from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml>

Professional Help-seeking

The University provides counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out Counselors' profiles on our webpage and make an online appointment with us. Three weeks' advance reservation is allowed. All personal information and details shared and discussed in counseling or therapy sessions are strictly confidential.

Counseling and Wellness Center

🏠 Room 5003 (via lift 3) ☎ (852) 2358 6696
🌐 <http://counsel.ust.hk> ✉ counsel@ust.hk

24/7 HEARing ☎ (852) 8208 2688

This is a 24-hour helpline that supports exclusively all HKUST students 7 days a week. The service is made available by our Counselors in collaboration with the Christian Family Service Center.



Meet Our Counselors