

# Disability Insight

Take a look around you

## Living with Bi-Polar Disorder

4<sup>th</sup> March 2021

### Key facts about Bi-Polar Disorder

- 1 in every 50 adults will be diagnosed with bi-polar disorder at some point in their life.
- Bi-polar can occur at any age, although it often develops between the ages of 15 and 25 and rarely develops after 50.
- Men and women are equally likely to develop bi-polar.

You will find a wealth of video testimonials on the Bipolar UK website. Here are a few:

[Simon's story of his bi-polar diagnosis and journey to recovery.](#)

[Ali Douglas, television presenter talks about coming out of her bi-polar closet.](#)

[A doctor with bi-polar disorder shares a lesson learned from a patient with the same condition.](#)

[Olivia Callaghan tells us what to say to someone with bi-polar disorder and what not to say.](#)

Supported by BSO Equality Unit

 HSC Business Services  
Organisation

## About Bi-Polar Disorder

Bi-polar disorder is a mental health condition that affects your mood, energy and ability to function in everyday activities. Your mood can fluctuate from feeling very low to feeling very excited and euphoric; these are commonly known as mood swings. Bi-polar used to be known as manic depression.

People with bi-polar disorder have episodes of:

- depression – feeling low in mood and lethargic; they may have overwhelming feelings of worthlessness, which can potentially lead to thoughts of suicide.
- mania – experiencing an elevated mood; they may have lots of energy, ambitious plans and ideas, spend large amounts of money on things they cannot afford and would not normally want. However, some people feel very creative and view the manic phase of bi-polar as a positive experience.

Unlike simple mood swings, each extreme episode of bi-polar disorder can last for several weeks (or much longer). The pattern of mood swings in bi-polar disorder varies widely. For example, some people will experience a few episodes in their life time and live very well in between episodes, while other people experience much more frequent episodes.

Some people may also experience symptoms of psychosis. Psychosis describes how a person's perception or view or opinion of reality becomes distorted. This is often accompanied by delusions, which are irrational and unfounded beliefs and/or hallucinations where the person may see, hear or sense things that other people can't.

## Different types of Bi-Polar Disorder

### Bi-polar I

- at least one high or manic episode, which has lasted for longer than one week - usually far longer.
- most people with Bi-polar I also have periods of deep depression.
- Untreated, a manic episode will generally last 3 to 6 months.
- Depressive episodes last rather longer - 6 to 12 months without treatment.

### Bi-polar II

- more than one episode of severe depression, but only mild manic episodes – this is called 'hypomania'.

### Rapid cycling

- four or more mood episodes in a 12-month period. This affects around 1 in 10 people with bi-polar disorder and can happen with both types I and II.

### Cyclothymia

- mood swings are less severe than those in full bi-polar disorder but can be longer. This can, in time, develop into full bi-polar disorder.

### **What are the causes?**

We don't understand this well, but research suggests that<sup>1</sup>:

- Bi-polar disorder seems to happen in families where there is a history of mental health problems.
- There may be a problem with the brain systems which control our moods - this is why medications can often help bi-polar disorder.
- Mood swings can be brought on by stressful experiences.

So genes, disturbances in brain function, life events and stresses may all be underlying reasons why a person may develop bi-polar disorder.

### **What treatments are available?**

The following treatment options are available:

- Medication to help manage and in some cases prevent an episode of mania or depression. These are known as mood stabilisers, and are taken every day on a long-term basis.
- Medication to treat the main symptoms of depression and mania; these are taken as and when an episode happens.
- self-monitoring of mood swings - psychoeducation where the person learns to recognise the triggers and signs of an episode of depression or mania.
- psychological treatment – such as talking therapy, which can help deal with depression.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Bipolar disorder: assessment and management. NICE Clinical Guideline (CG185). 2020.

- lifestyle advice – such as doing [regular exercise](#), planning activities you enjoy, as well as advice on [improving your diet](#) and [getting more sleep](#).

It's thought using a combination of different treatment methods is the best way to control bi-polar disorder.

## **Bi-Polar Disorder during the Coronavirus Pandemic**

The extent of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic is as yet unknown, however it is thought that restrictions such as staying at home and social distancing could increase the risk of both manic and depressive relapses. Other issues of concern include the general stresses associated with disease outbreak, and reduced access to treatment during a pandemic, both of which can trigger a relapse.

## **Support for you if you experience Bi-Polar Disorder**

Your GP will refer you to a community mental health team.

### Recovery Colleges

Recovery colleges offer free courses about mental health to help you manage your symptoms. They can help you to take control of your life and become an expert in your own wellbeing and recovery. You can usually self-refer to a recovery college. There are lots of Recovery Colleges across Northern Ireland. You can find them by searching within your local trust website.

### [Make a Wellness Recovery Action Plan \(WRAP\)](#)

Learning to spot early signs of mania or depression is important in self-management. The idea of the WRAP is to help you stay well and achieve what you would like to. The WRAP looks at areas like how you are affected by your illness and what you could do to manage them.

## **What you can do to support a colleague with Bi-Polar Disorder**

Being open to talking to a colleague about their experiences can help them feel supported and accepted.

If you are a line manager of someone with a diagnosis of bi-polar, it may be useful to discuss with them how bi-polar affects them at work, gain an understanding of their triggers, mood cycles and warning signs. This can help you find the appropriate strategies and reasonable adjustments to support your employee and

enable them to continue their role in the workplace. Organisations like Bipolar UK can help you with this. If the need for awareness training of team members is identified (in agreement with the individual), contact the Equality Unit. Access to Work may be able to help with training costs.

### Support for you if you care for a person with Bi-Polar Disorder

[MindWise](#) have dedicated carer and family support services in the Northern Health & Social Care Trust (NHSCT) and the South East Health & Social Care Trust (SEHSCT).

[Bipolar UK](#) provide support for people with bi-polar disorder and their families and friends. They also have a supportive online community.

[Carers NI](#) provide advice and information for carers.

### Further reading

[Royal College of Psychiatry](#)

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

[NHS](#)

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

[www.mindwisenv.org](http://www.mindwisenv.org)

<https://mentalhealthrecovery.com/>

[www.bipolaruk.org](http://www.bipolaruk.org)

