

Bipolar Disorder



What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder – sometimes called **manic depression** – is a serious mental illness which affects about 1 in every 100 people during their lifetime. Bipolar disorder causes extreme shifts in a person's mood. People with bipolar disorder often have recurring episodes of mania and depression throughout their lives, although many are free of symptoms between these episodes.

It is important to distinguish bipolar disorder from **depression** (even though bipolar disorder is often termed *manic depression*). Some people with bipolar disorder will mainly have lengthy bouts of depression with symptoms similar to other forms of depression. A very few people only have manic episodes (highs). But for most people what distinguishes bipolar disorder is that it usually involves both highs and lows (depressive episodes).

This is not comparable with having mood swings: bipolar disorder usually involves protracted episodes of depression and mania. What also distinguishes the illness is its severity: highs and lows tend to be extreme and can involve psychosis (losing touch with reality).

However, there is a scale of severity when it comes to the symptoms of bipolar disorder. In other words, some people can have more acute symptoms than others. **Hafa!** suggests that patients do not simply focus on the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Instead they should insist

that they get a full explanation from their doctor or psychiatrist of the **symptoms** they are experiencing, as it is the symptoms which need to be addressed when working towards recovery.

What causes bipolar disorder?

There are several theories about what causes bipolar disorder. Some evidence suggests that bipolar disorder runs in families and that genes are a significant factor. Other theories suggest that things that happen to a person, such as stressful life events or physical injuries, can lead to the onset of symptoms of the illness. The likelihood is that there is a combination of causes for bipolar disorder that may include genetic predisposition and life events which trigger the illness.

Symptoms

The main symptoms of bipolar disorder are as follows:

1. Periods of **manic** behaviour such as:
 - A continuous elevated or euphoric mood
 - Irritability and restlessness
 - Increased energy
 - Inflated self-esteem
 - Little need for sleep
 - Talkativeness
 - Increased sex drive
 - Racing thoughts
 - Inability to concentrate
 - Risk-taking
 - Reckless spending.
2. Periods of **depressive** behaviour such as:
 - A persistent subdued or sad mood
 - Anxiety
 - Loss of interest or pleasure in life
 - Change in appetite or body weight
 - Insomnia/oversleeping
 - Fatigue

- Loss of energy
- Lack of sex drive
- Self-harm and suicidal thoughts
- Feelings of guilt and worthlessness
- Difficulty concentrating.

3. A **mixed state** with symptoms of both mania and depression.

4. **Psychosis** (losing touch with reality) may also be present during serious episodes of either mania or depression. This can include delusions and hallucinations. Delusions are strongly held, false beliefs often with no basis in reality; hallucinations involve a person experiencing or perceiving things that do not exist.

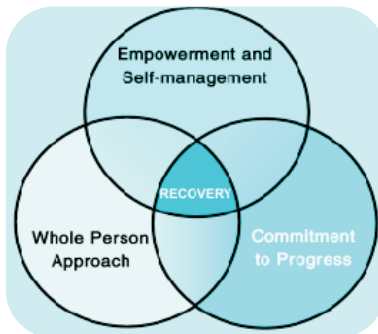
Medication

Medication can play an important part in relieving symptoms of bipolar disorder and achieving recovery (see overleaf for more about recovery). However, medication can also cause side-effects. The side-effects of mood stabilisers can include nausea, diarrhoea, muscle spasms, weight gain and lethargy; the side-effects of antipsychotics can include including shaking, weight gain, muscular spasms, hormonal problems, sexual dysfunctions, sedation and heart problems. These side-effects should not be confused with symptoms of bipolar disorder.

Next we look at how you can approach recovery if you have the symptoms of bipolar disorder.

Recovery for people with Bipolar Disorder

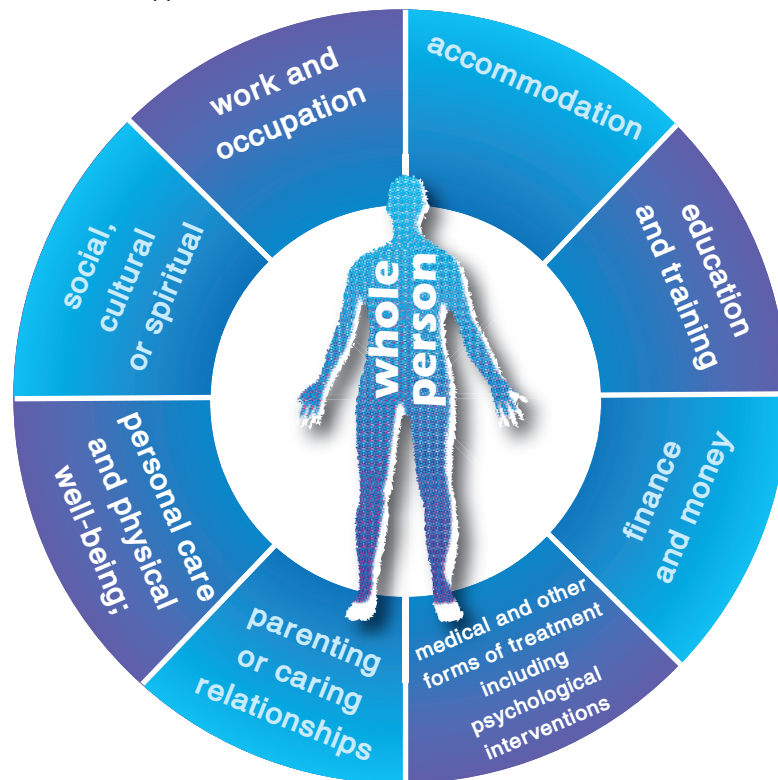
Medical science has not identified a straightforward “cure” for bipolar disorder but Hafal believes that all people with bipolar disorder can work successfully towards recovery. Recovery means regaining mental health and achieving a better quality of life. It is focused on enabling people to improve their lives in all areas rather than just maintaining an adequate existence. Hafal’s clients have found that recovery depends on these three components:



Empowerment and self-management means exercising rights and responsibilities in making choices about life (for instance, having the first and last word in any discussion about you) and taking the actions required to lead a life based on those choices (for example, writing a recovery plan in your own words or administering your own medication). *But it is acknowledged that occasionally it may be necessary for others to take control for reasons of safety.*

A **commitment to progress** involves actively taking steps to improve life. When planning your recovery it is vital to agree and act upon a step-by-step, goal-focused plan and work according to a timetable.

A **‘Whole Person’ approach** (sometimes called a ‘holistic’ approach) means addressing all key aspects of life which together contribute to well-being. By setting goals in all areas of life people can approach recovery more comprehensively. Here we set out the Whole Person Approach.



For more information on recovery, visit: www.hafal.org

About hafal

Hafal (meaning 'equal') is the principal organisation in Wales working with individuals recovering from serious mental illness and their families. We are dedicated to empowering people with serious mental illness and their families to: **achieve better quality of life, fulfil their ambitions for recovery, fight discrimination, enjoy equal access to health and social care, housing, income, education and employment.** For more information, contact us at:

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