

Supporting someone with bipolar

Walking alongside someone who feels the ups and downs of bipolar disorder is not easy. You may need to help your loved one with the fallout from a manic episode and/or support them through depression.

- Know that your aroha and āwhina (support) can make a huge difference. Just having someone understanding to talk to will be invaluable.
- Maintain connection and build trust – whanaungatanga is often key to recovery. Keep in touch and keep them included.
- Remember that bipolar is an illness and is not anyone's fault. It is important not to blame or judge.
- Try to understand what your loved one is experiencing. They can't just "hold it together" or "snap out of it".
- Encourage and support them to seek treatment, and to try again if one doctor, therapist or medication does not work out. Recovery will be an ongoing process, but things will get better.
- Find ways to look after yourself and maintain your own wellbeing. Find out more at [mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing).

Get support from friends and whānau



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Keep learning

Learn more about bipolar and strategies that can help you. See websites such as [healthnavigator.org.nz](https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz), and have a look at MHF book reviews at [mentalhealth.org.nz/books](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/books).

Use digital tools available online: check out [smallsteps.org.nz](https://www.smallsteps.org.nz), [thelowdown.co.nz](https://www.thelowdown.co.nz), or [justathought.co.nz](https://www.justathought.co.nz). You can also try breathing, sleep or mindfulness apps on your phone.

Helplines

Free call or txt 1737 anytime for support from a trained counsellor. For a list of helplines, visit [mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines).

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of information and resources on mental health and wellbeing available to order for free from our website: [shop.mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.shop.mentalhealth.org.nz).

Contact us

Resource & Information Service
Email: info@mentalhealth.org.nz

Find us online: [mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)
[facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)
twitter.com/mentalhealthnz
[instagram.com/mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)

Help us to help others

The Mental Health Foundation is a charity and we rely on donations to support our work. Visit [mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)

Disclaimer

This brochure should not be used in place of an accurate diagnosis or assessment. If you think you may have bipolar disorder or would like further information or support, please talk to your GP or Māori health provider.

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Bipolar Disorder



What is bipolar disorder?

People with bipolar disorder (previously called manic depression) find their moods cycle from very positive and active (high, also called **mania**) to very depressed and inactive (low, also called **depression**).

Bipolar is more than temporary feelings - these feelings can be extreme and have a disruptive impact on your life.

Experiencing bipolar can be distressing. Symptoms can make daily life difficult and affect relationships, but can be managed well with the right mix of tools and support. With treatment, support, and activities that build wellbeing, you can live a full and positive life.

What are the symptoms of bipolar?

Everyone's experience of bipolar is unique. No one matches the diagnosis and symptoms exactly, but there are common experiences and themes.

If you have bipolar disorder, you will have episodes of **depression** or **mania** or both that last for weeks or months. During this time, the symptoms can fluctuate, getting more or less severe.

Depression is not just feeling pōuri or sad. It can cause you to lose interest in usual activities, or find it hard to concentrate or think clearly. Some people feel more irritable or angry, rather than sad. You may lose confidence, feel excessively guilty, and have thoughts of hopelessness and death. People can also feel **anxiety**, worry or dread.

During a **manic** episode, you might feel very energetic and positive. You may also be irritable and experience rapidly changing emotions, from laughter to tears to anger and back. Some people experience **psychosis** (believing or seeing things that are not there) during manic episodes.

Mania can also lead to risk-taking behaviour, such as driving fast or reckless spending of money. This can lead to embarrassment or shame when the mania subsides.

You may be diagnosed with **bipolar I** or **bipolar II**. Bipolar I involves more severe episodes of depression and mania. With bipolar II, the "high" experiences are often less severe and are called **hypomania**.

All of these emotions and experiences can be frightening. If you are in crisis now, get help immediately. See mentalhealth.org.nz/help.

What causes bipolar?

The exact cause of bipolar is unknown. Research suggests that there is a strong genetic link. If someone in your whānau has bipolar, there is an increased chance of you developing it.

We also know stressful life events can trigger bipolar in some people (such as trauma, grief, abuse and neglect). If your needs were not met as a child - maybe due to family illness or hardship - this can be a factor. Physical illness, lack of sleep and misuse of alcohol, drugs and medications may also trigger symptoms.

What is your path forward with bipolar?

Addressing your bipolar disorder will usually involve a combination of the following:

- medication
- talking therapies
- doing things that support your wellbeing
- whānau support and involvement
- peer support

Many people with bipolar find that taking prescribed **medication** regularly helps keep moods stable. Talk to your doctor or specialist about what is right for you. Make sure you are well informed about what it does and possible side effects (and how to manage them).

Don't stop taking your medication or change your dose without talking to your health professional first. Stopping suddenly can make you feel worse.

Talking therapies (such as cognitive behavioural therapy, CBT) can be very helpful. There is strong evidence that a combination of medication and therapy is more effective than medication alone.

A good therapist who you trust can help you cope with feelings and symptoms, and change behaviour patterns that may be unhelpful. You will learn to use tools and strategies to get balance into your thinking and feeling.

If you try therapy and find it doesn't work for you, remember there are many other options. Keep exploring different types of therapy or therapists. Therapy takes time - try to stick with it and talk to your therapist about what you're finding difficult.

You may also use **rongoā Māori** and traditional healing methods as part of your journey to recovery.

Strategies for recovery

Looking after your own mental, emotional and physical wellbeing is key to getting through tough times and to maintaining recovery:

- Learn about bipolar and read/listen to stories of other people who have found a way through.
- Get to know your early warning signs or triggers by keeping a mood diary, and identify and reduce stressful activities.
- Develop strategies you can use when you feel an episode building. Talk to a trusted whānau member or support person, contact your doctor or therapist, and take action.
- **Sleep** is an important factor in depression and mania. Maintain (or restore) a good sleep pattern - sleeping too much or too little can be warning signs.
- Stay well: Include some exercise in your life. Cut back on alcohol and avoid drugs. Use relaxation exercises, yoga, meditation, mirimiri or massage.
- Spend time doing activities that bring you purpose and joy, like time in nature or creative hobbies - music, art, kapa haka and more.
- **Peer support groups** can connect you with others who have similar experiences. Many find they are a key part of their wellbeing. Find support group listings here: mentalhealth.org.nz/groups
- Be prepared: Having a written plan, developed together with a health professional or another trusted person, can help you if difficult feelings return.
- Recovery will be a journey. Work with your family and support system, and keep trying. Things will get easier.

Do the things that bring you joy

