

Supporting someone with bipolar disorder

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 (love) 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 disorder 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.
- **Practical support** is invaluable, as managing daily life can become overwhelming for people experiencing mental distress and/or illness. Support with life admin and accessing health services can be a great help.
- 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



Keep learning

Learn more about mental health and wellbeing. See websites such as [mentalhealth.org.nz](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz), [healthify.nz](https://www.healthify.nz) and [depression.org.nz](https://www.depression.org.nz). Find book reviews at [mentalhealth.org.nz/books](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/books) or visit your local library.

Online tools

Use free digital tools and support programmes available online. Check out [smallsteps.org.nz](https://www.smallsteps.org.nz), [headstrong.org.nz](https://www.headstrong.org.nz), [thelowdown.co.nz](https://www.thelowdown.co.nz), or [justathought.co.nz](https://www.justathought.co.nz)

Helplines

Talking to a trained counsellor on a helpline can be really useful. Calls are free, confidential and available 24/7.

Call or text 1737 for support.

See [mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines) for more options.

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of free mental health and wellbeing information and resources. Visit shop.mentalhealth.org.nz

Find us online

To find out more about our work, visit:

- ✉ resource@mentalhealth.org.nz
- 🌐 www.mentalhealth.org.nz
- 📷 [mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)
- 📘 [mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)

Disclaimer

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

Help us, to help others

The Mental Health Foundation is a charity, and we rely on donations to support our work.

Visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz to find out more.

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BIPOLAR DISORDER



What is bipolar disorder?

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

Bipolar is more than temporary feelings – the experiences can be intense and have a disruptive impact on your life.

Experiencing bipolar can be distressing. Symptoms can make daily life difficult, 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.

How do people experience bipolar disorder?

Everyone's experience of bipolar disorder is unique, 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 recklessly 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** (rather than mania). All of these emotions and experiences can feel overwhelming and frightening.

If you are in crisis now, get help immediately.

Call 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor.

If you are at risk of harm, call 111 or your local mental health crisis team. See [mentalhealth.org.nz/help](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/help)

What causes bipolar disorder?

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, sleep deprivation, or misuse of alcohol, drugs and medications may also trigger symptoms.

What is your path forward with bipolar disorder?

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

- medication
- talking therapies
- habits that support your wellbeing
- whānau support and involvement
- peer support.

Many people with bipolar disorder 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, or 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 manage feelings and symptoms, and help you change behaviour patterns that may be unhelpful. You will learn to use tools and strategies to find balance in 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 recovery journey.

Strategies for recovery

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

- **Learn** about bipolar disorder 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, support person, doctor or therapist, and take action. Having a **written plan**, developed together with a health professional or another trusted person, can help you if difficult feelings return.
- **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 keeping well. Find support group listings here: **[mentalhealth.org.nz/groups](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/groups)**
- Recovery will be a journey. Work with your family and support system, and keep trying. Things will get easier.

