

## How can family and friends help?

Family and friends can play a big role in helping their loved one manage bipolar disorder and get back to their usual activities.

- Learn about bipolar disorder and what to expect.
- Family and friends are often the first to notice warning signs of mania and depression. Talk with your loved one when they feel well and make an action plan that details what should be done when you notice certain symptoms.
- Remember that it can take time to recover from bipolar disorder. Ask your loved one what kind of help or support is most helpful for them.
- Recognize that you may have difficult feelings of your own when a loved one is diagnosed. Seek help for yourself if you're having a hard time coping or would like support of your own.

If you think you or someone you care about is experiencing bipolar disorder, it's important to seek help. Here are some free resources:

### Aboriginal Crisis Line

1-800-588-8717. This crisis line offers help and support for anyone in BC and it is available day and night every day. You can also access help specifically for adults and Elders or children and youth by calling the same phone number. This crisis line is offered in partnership with the First Nations Health Authority and KUU-US Crisis Response Services.

### Native Youth Crisis Hotline

1-877-209-1266. Available day and night, throughout Canada.

### BC Mental Health Support Line

310-6789 (no area coded needed). They offer confidential help and support at any time of day or night.

### Your family doctor or community health nurse

They can see what might be contributing to the problem, and they can refer you to special services.

### Your Band, Tribal Council, Friendship Centre or other organization

They may offer mental health services and programs.

### The Mood Disorders Association of BC

604-873-0103 or [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net). They offer support, education, and treatment programs for mood disorders like bipolar disorder, and they have a network of support groups around BC.

### Bipolar Wellness Centre

A BC website for people from all cultures, developed by a group out of the University of BC. The site features tips and videos on getting the most out of life when you have bipolar disorder. Visit [www.bdwellness.com](http://www.bdwellness.com).

### Strengthening Families Together —First Nations Edition

A program from the BC Schizophrenia Society to help families dealing with any mental illness. Visit [www.bcscs.org](http://www.bcscs.org) or call 1-888-888-0029.



*The artwork in this brochure was created by Darren Blaney.*

*This brochure is adapted from work by the First Nations Mental Health Program, Vancouver Community Mental Health Services—Vancouver Coastal Health. We would like to gratefully acknowledge their leadership in developing tailored materials for Aboriginal people.*

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)



BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information  
HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

2016



## bipolar disorder a guide for aboriginal people

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)



## What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is an illness in which people have mood swings that are out of proportion to what is going on in their lives. You experience emotional highs (called mania) and lows (called depression), with periods of normal mood in between. Bipolar disorder usually begins in the late teens or early twenties. While there is no cure for bipolar disorder, it can still be managed well. You should expect to recover.

## What causes bipolar disorder?

We aren't sure what causes bipolar disorder. It's likely that a number of different factors contribute to bipolar disorder, including changes in your body, genetics (your family history), and life experiences.

Bipolar disorder affects all cultures. It affects people on reserve and off reserve, in rural communities or large cities.

## What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Everyone experiences bipolar disorder differently. The main symptoms of bipolar disorder include:

### Mania

- Very high mood and very high self-esteem
- Talking quickly, thinking quickly
- A lot more energy and ideas than usual
- Poor judgement, risky behaviour that's unusual for you
- Problems concentrating
- Problems sleeping
- Sometimes experiencing a break with reality (called psychosis)

While mania is often thought of as a happy or excited mood, some people experience mania as long and intense periods of irritability or anger.

### Depression

- Feeling sad, guilty, hopeless
- Loss of energy and interest in things you used to enjoy
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Problems concentrating
- Thoughts of ending your life or hurting yourself

There are two different types of bipolar disorder. Both include mania and depression. Bipolar 1 has a more severe form of mania. Bipolar 2 disorder has a milder form of mania, but it can be easy to misdiagnose.

## How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

A doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms. As bipolar disorder can look like other mental illnesses or physical health problems, they will rule out other causes before they diagnose bipolar disorder. Some mental illnesses tend to go alongside bipolar disorder, so it can take a bit of work to get a clear understanding of your experiences. While this process can take time, it's important to get an accurate diagnosis so you can get the right treatment and supports.

## How is bipolar disorder treated?

Bipolar disorder is very treatable. It is usually treated with medicine and counselling. Many people worry about talking to a doctor about a mental health problem. You can find tips on working with doctors at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/managing-a-mental-illness](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/managing-a-mental-illness).

**Medicine**—Most people with bipolar disorder take medicines called mood stabilizers to reduce episodes of mania and depression. Your doctor may prescribe other medicines, depending on the symptoms you experience. It can take several weeks to see the full effects of these medicines. Talk to your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about the medicine that you are prescribed. Tell your doctor about other treatments you are using, including herbs.

**Counselling**—Counselling or “talk therapy” can be a helpful addition to treatment for bipolar disorder. Common therapies for bipolar disorder can help you manage stress, manage problems, and build healthy coping skills.

**Hospital stays**—During serious episodes of depression or mania, some people may need a brief stay at a hospital.

Taking care of yourself and finding balance is an important part of feeling well. Good support from family, friends, Elders, faith communities, or support groups can make a big difference. There are many things you can try on your own, too. Small changes like getting enough sleep, eating well, connecting to nature, and regular exercise can really help. Pay attention to how you use alcohol or other drugs, and talk to your doctor or health care provider if you're having a hard time managing substance use. If you are interested in traditional healing practices, reach out to your community for suggestions and advice.

Remember that this medical way of thinking about bipolar disorder is not the only way to understand your experiences. Seek advice from people you respect—they may have perspectives or ideas that help you on your own journey.