Bipolar disorder is a complex illness which can vary a great deal in nature and severity between people.

People with bipolar disorder have problems with their moods, experiencing extreme highs and lows. If you have bipolar disorder you will experience periods or ‘episodes’ of highs known as mania or hypomania and usually, periods of depression.

You may also have problems with thinking and perception, which can include symptoms of psychosis. This can include thinking things that are not true (delusions) and seeing or hearing things that are not there (hallucinations).

Research suggests that bipolar disorder runs in families, and genes can influence whether someone develops the illness. We also know that the brain systems involved in controlling our moods work differently in people with bipolar disorder. Factors such as life stress, lack of sleep and recreational drugs can trigger mood episodes.

Bipolar disorder can cause a great deal of distress, but there is a lot that can be done to stay as well

Treatments

For many people with bipolar disorder medication is a key part of staying well.

There are a large number of medications that can help. Some work by preventing the extreme highs or lows caused by the condition; these are known as mood stabilisers, and often need to be taken daily for long periods. Other medications may then be used to treat episodes of high or low moods when they happen.

Different medications suit different people, and finding the best medication for an individual can take time, and trials of different medications and doses.

Find out more about medication used to treat bipolar disorder, including how different drugs work, their potential side effects and the way that they interact with other drugs, food and drink.

Talking treatments such as psychoeducation can also be helpful. This approach helps people to understand their illness, learn to recognise early warning signs of highs and lows and develop the skills needed to stay as well as possible. Bipolar Education Programme Cymru, also known as BEPC, is one example.

A combination of medication and psychoeducation is often most effective.