

# psychotherapy for bipolar disorder

Although effective medications have been found for bipolar disorder, many patients still experience episode recurrences and relapse. Some experience between-episode symptoms that may not be serious enough to be considered a full-blown episode, but could still cause some discomfort and interference with day-to-day activities. A high rate of relapse and episode recurrences could be because of medication non-compliance, alcohol and drug use, high stress levels, many between-episode symptoms, and poor daily functioning. These issues have alerted mental health professionals to try psychotherapy and psychosocial interventions, **in addition to medication**, to improve illness outcome and quality of life for bipolar patients.



## Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

A treatment approach that has been well researched for a wide range of adult psychiatric disorders is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which has recently been adapted to bipolar disorder. Although CBT for bipolar disorder is relatively new, it has been used in the treatment of a range of psychiatric disorders including unipolar depression, generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, and eating disorders. It has also been applied as an adjunctive treatment for disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, and schizophrenia. This information package is based on this approach.



CBT is a structured and time-limited intervention. It is a comprehensive psychological therapy in which there is an emphasis on collaboration between therapist and patient, and on active participation by the patient in achieving therapeutic goals. CBT is also focused on problem solving. The central aim of CBT is to teach patients how their thoughts and beliefs play an important role in the way they respond to situations and people. The CBT approach also teaches patients the tools that could help them to make their response more helpful.

CBT can play a role in teaching bipolar patients about their disorder and helping them deal with adjustment difficulties. CBT can also help patients cope with everyday stressors through active problem solving, and teach patients to monitor and regulate their own thoughts, moods, and activities, and thus be prepared to manage between-episode symptoms.



## Research

CBT for bipolar disorder has been evaluated in a controlled trial here at the Centre for Clinical Interventions. The results of our study showed that CBT for bipolar disorder was effective in helping patients feel less depressed and more confident about managing their illness. While this type of psychosocial treatment is still being evaluated worldwide, preliminary results from a number of studies have been positive.

## Summary

Because bipolar patients experience episode recurrences and some difficulty in everyday living, some form of psychosocial treatment is recommended as an addition to medication. Recent research has found that cognitive behavioural therapy for bipolar disorder appears to be beneficial for patients. However, bipolar patients are reminded that this is an **adjunctive treatment** and must not be considered as a substitute for medication.