Bipolar Disorder (which used to be called “Manic-Depression”) is a serious disorder that causes extreme mood swings that affect one’s energy levels, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours.

It’s important to note that these shifts in mood are different from the mood swings most people experience. They can impair one’s judgement & general ability to function, sometimes with severe consequences; extreme moods can cause damage to relationships, poor performance at school or on the job, financial debt, and suicide.

These dramatic mood swings – from overly ‘high’ and/or irritable, to hopelessness & despair – can last for weeks or months, often with periods of normal mood in between. The period of highs and lows are called episodes of mania and depression, respectively.

Signs and symptoms of a depressive episode include:

- Feeling sad, tearful, anxious, or ‘empty’; being unable to enjoy things or feel pleasure;
- Sleeping too much or too little; feeling much less energetic, ‘slowed down’ or exhausted;
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or thinking clearly;
- Feeling guilty, worthless; ruminating on perceived failures or mistakes in the past;
- Changes in appetite; unintended weight loss/gain;
- Chronic pain or persistent bodily symptoms that cannot be explained by physical illness or injury;
- Feeling hopeless; having thoughts of death or suicide.

A manic episode can be a time of extreme well-being, energy, and optimism but it can impair your thinking & judgment. You may make some bad decisions, or behave in embarrassing or sometimes risky ways. One’s behaviours & thoughts are markedly different from usual. Symptoms include:

- Increased energy, feeling hyperactive and/or restless; needing very little sleep;
- Excessively ‘high’ or euphoric mood and/or extreme irritability;
- Inflated self-esteem or sense of grandiosity; unrealistic belief in one’s abilities;
- Racing thoughts; jumping from one idea to another;
- Speaking very fast (‘like the words cannot come out fast enough’); others find it hard to follow what you are talking about;
- Easily distracted, can’t concentrate well;
- Feeling less inhibited; being over-familiar or aggressive with others;
- Poor judgment & increased impulsivity, which may include spending money recklessly or dangerous behaviours, such as drug abuse or unsafe sex, which may lead to disastrous consequences.

A hypomanic episode is similar to a manic episode but the symptoms are less severe and may only last a few days. These episodes may feel good to the person who may even function well and be more productive than usual. He/she may not believe anything is wrong and is unlikely to seek medical help. However, without proper treatment, hypomanic symptoms may become more severe and incapacitating, or may switch into depression.

Mixed bipolar states occur when both manic and depressive symptoms occur at the same time. For example, someone may feel very hopeless and suicidal, while at the same time feeling very energized.

Sometimes, severe episodes can trigger symptoms of psychosis. Psychotic symptoms may include hallucinations (seeing, hearing, or sensing things that are not there) or delusions (strongly held beliefs that are false & not influenced by logical reasoning). Delusions tend to reflect the current mood state – for instance, in a manic episode, one might have grandiose ideas, believing oneself to be on a special mission or having extraordinary abilities, while delusions of guilt or worthlessness might occur during a depressive episode.

The risk of suicide is relatively high among those with bipolar disorder; it is estimated that 25% to 50% of individuals diagnosed with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once.

Possible Causes of Bipolar: Bipolar affects both males and females, typically developing in late adolescence and early adulthood. There is no single cause of bipolar disorder. Instead, it is likely that several factors play a role in its development.

Individuals who have biological relatives with the same condition are at a slightly higher risk of developing bipolar disorder themselves, suggesting some genetic link. However, studies of identical twins demonstrate that genes are not the whole story. It is most likely that environmental factors are crucial too. Periods of high stress, major life changes, alcohol & substance abuse, may trigger episodes.

How is it diagnosed? Bipolar disorder cannot be determined physiologically (say, with a blood test). Instead, a diagnosis is made on the basis of symptoms and, when available, family history. Correct diagnosis is essential to determine the most effective treatment. For instance, some conditions are misdiagnosed as depression; for someone with bipolar disorder, antidepressants alone are not effective and can, in some cases, worsen symptoms.

A mental health professional will ask about your thoughts, feelings, and behaviour patterns. With your permission, he/she may speak with your relatives or close friends for further information on possible symptoms of mania or depression. Any history or current use of alcohol or drugs should also be assessed.

Treatment: Bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout a person’s life, even during periods when he/she feels better. Effective & appropriate treatment is vital for reducing the frequency & severity of manic & depressive episodes and allowing the person to benefit from a more balanced & enjoyable life.

Psychotherapy helps you to understand patterns to episodes and factors that typically trigger them. You and your therapist work together to identify early warning signs & to address symptoms before they become
overwhelming. You can develop strategies to cope with mood changes & prevent them from becoming full-blown episodes of mania or depression. A therapist can also help you to improve stress management and relaxation skills.

**Medication** plays a vital role in balancing mood & minimizing the negative effects of manic and depressive episodes. Medication for bipolar disorder should be prescribed by a psychiatrist i.e. a medical doctor specialising in mental health.

There are several classes of medications that are effective in regulating & stabilising mood in bipolar disorder. These include **mood stabilizers** (e.g. lithium), **anticonvulsants** (e.g. Depakote, Tegretol), and **atypical antipsychotics** (e.g. Risperdal). More than one may be prescribed for optimal treatment. It is important to find the right drug, or combination of drugs, that best suits each individual. **It can take several weeks before there is noticeable improvement in symptoms**, so it is vital to take the medication consistently.

Be aware that all medications have side effects. If you experience adverse effects, dosages can be adjusted or alternative drugs may be prescribed. **Always speak with your psychiatrist before stopping medication.**

In almost all cases, bipolar disorder is best controlled when treatment is continuous, even during periods of remission (i.e. when the person is symptom-free). This is called **maintenance therapy**. It can be very tempting to stop treatment when one feels better but this greatly increases the risk of re-experiencing mania and/or depression in the future.

**Self-help:** While bipolar disorder is not a condition that you can treat on your own, there are many things you can do to optimize your well-being:

- **Taking good care of yourself:** Take regular physical exercise; try to eat healthily and at regular times each day. As far as possible, stick to a regular bedtime & wake-time; ensure you get sufficient sleep.

- **Minimizing stress:** Reduce work & personal stress as much as is practical. Practice good stress management & relaxation skills (e.g. yoga, meditation) regularly. Make time for things you enjoy.

- **Psychoeducation:** Read more about bipolar disorder & ask questions about your medication(s) & further strategies to stay symptom-free. Explore any concerns you have about your treatment plan with your doctor or psychologist.

- **Social support:** When you are well, help your friends & family understand what happens to you and how best they can support you if you feel unwell.

- **Maintaining well-being:** Regularly monitor your moods with exercises designed to increase self awareness & develop coping strategies. Take your medication regularly, as directed, and keep up with your therapy appointments.

- **Reducing risk:** Keep an eye out for early warning signs that you are beginning to feel unwell (recruit close family & friends to help); address symptoms early on to prevent debilitating episodes. Avoid mood-altering drugs, including alcohol.

**Looking for further information?**

http://kidshealth.org/teen/ is a website for young people with an article on bipolar disorder.

The following sites have information on many mental health issues, including bipolar disorder:

http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall.aspx
http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/
http://www.mayoclinic.com

At UWI, the **Counselling & Psychological Services (CAPS)** offers free and confidential counselling to students. Call 662 2002, ext 2491 for information or to make an appointment. Or email counsellor@sta.uwi.edu

We are located in the **Health Service Unit (HSU)** and open throughout the year, Mondays to Fridays, from 8:30am to 4:30pm, with evening sessions till 7pm during semesters.