

Mental disorders in the family affect the treatment of people with bipolar disorder

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Bipolar disorder is characterized by transitions between depression and mania.
Credit: Wikipedia

Patients with bipolar disorder who have multiple family members with

severe mental disorders are more difficult to treat and require more medicine. But if they receive an intensive course of treatment, the effect is just as good as for patients who do not have a family history of severe mental disorders.

Bipolar disorder is a serious mental disorder that affects >1% of the population during their lifetimes. Now, a new study from Aarhus University and Aarhus University Hospital Psychiatry—in collaboration with a number of American hospitals led by Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston—follows in the wake of previous studies showing that patients with [bipolar disorder](#) likely have many [family members](#) who also suffer from severe mental [disorders](#).

Treatment should be intensified

However, the new element in the study is that the course of the disorder is more complicated for patients who have, e.g., a parent or sibling with a severe mental disorder. They had more depressive and manic episodes and more suicide attempts during their lifetimes, while at the same time requiring a more intensive course of treatment with more medicine.

"The positive finding is that this extra effort in relation to treatment resulted in patients who both had and didn't have close relatives with severe mental disorders responding equally well to the treatment," explains one of the researchers behind the study, Medical Doctor and Ph.D. Ole Köhler-Forsberg from Aarhus University and Aarhus University Hospital—Psychiatry.

The findings have just been published in the scientific journal *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

At the start of the study, patients with bipolar disorder self-reported the number of first-degree relatives with severe mental disorders. Of the

participants, 85% had at least one, and 20% had five or more. Among the most frequent disorders were depression, alcohol abuse and bipolar disorder.

"We also found that a higher number of [family](#) relatives with severe mental disorders was linked to a lower level of education, lower income and earlier debut of the disorder. This suggests that mental disorders in the family also affect the lives of the patients in a very broad and general sense which goes beyond the disorder itself," says Ole Köhler-Forsberg.

The results are based on two large American randomised controlled trials with a total of 757 participants. The study is the first of its kind to include such a large group of patients and also to follow these patients over 24 weeks while they were treated with one of four different treatments.

"Future studies could take a closer look at how mental disorders in the family affect the patient, but also at the entire family and the lives of relatives, and whether efforts to help e.g. the children of people with mental disorders should begin earlier," says the researcher.

More information: Ole Köhler-Forsberg et al, Familial severe psychiatric history in bipolar disorder and correlation with disease severity and treatment response, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2020.03.157](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.03.157)

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