

## TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS: BIPOLAR DISORDER

### What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a condition characterized by extreme changes in a person's mood, energy, thinking, and behavior. Children with bipolar disorder have episodes of mania and many also experience episodes of depression.

An episode of mania is where a person's mood is elevated (overly happy), expansive, or very irritable and the person also has increased energy at the same time. These symptoms are present most or all of the day for at least four consecutive days. These symptoms should be a very clear change from the child's normal mood and behavior.

Other mania symptoms may include:

- Unrealistic highs in self-esteem or perceived ability and importance
- Significant increase in energy
- Decreased need for sleep; being able to go with little or no sleep for days without feeling tired
- Increase in talking, including increased rate of speech and difficulty interrupting their talking
- Distractibility — the child's attention jumps frequently from one thing to the next
- Racing thoughts or ideas — for example, thoughts are coming so fast they are hard to describe
- Excessive increase in goal-oriented activity
- Repeated high risk-taking behavior, such as abusing alcohol and drugs, reckless driving, or sexual promiscuity

### Diagnosis

The diagnosis of bipolar disorder in children and teens is complex. The symptoms listed above are often part of other conditions, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder (DMDD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), anxiety, and substance abuse. This is why it is important to have a psychiatric or mental health specialist involved in diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder.

### What causes Bipolar Disorder?

There is no single known cause of Bipolar Disorder. It is likely the case that many factors work together to cause the illness for any given individual. Research suggests that genetics plays a big role in the cause of Bipolar Disorder because the conditions runs strongly in families. Having a parent with Bipolar Disorder makes a child 4-6 times more likely to develop the illness themselves; however, genetics are not the only cause. Clinical experience suggests that trauma or stressful life events can trigger the onset of Bipolar Disorder for people who are genetically vulnerable.

### Treatment

Bipolar Disorder can be effectively treated for children and teenagers. Treatment typically includes education for the patient and family about the condition, mood stabilizing medications, and psychotherapy. Medications often help decrease the occurrence of manic episodes and may also help with depression. Psychotherapy helps the patient learn more about stressors that contribute to mood changes, strategies to cope with strong emotions, and ways to improve self-esteem and relationships.

### What is the caregiver's role in treatment?

Parents and other caregivers play an essential role in a child's treatment for Bipolar Disorder. Parents must learn about and consider the full range of treatment options. Once a treatment plan is selected, the parent can help their child stay committed to the plan. This may involve providing and overseeing the child taking their medication, scheduling and attending psychotherapy sessions, and regularly checking in with the child's medical doctor about any new symptoms or side effects of medications.

## Where can I learn more about bipolar disorder?

Families should start learning about Bipolar Disorder with the following books and websites that provide high-quality, evidence-based information.

### Books:

- *The Bipolar Workbook: Tools for Controlling Your Mood Swings*. Second Edition. (2015) By Monica Ramirez Basco (An excellent, practical guide to managing the disorder; based on CBT principles)
- *The Bipolar Teen: What you can do to help you child and your family*. (2007) By David Miklowitz and Elizabeth George (A parent guide to helping their child)
- *An Unquiet Mind*. (1995) By Kay Redfield Jamison. (A memoir written by a bipolar disorder researcher who has the illness herself)

### Web resources:

- [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Parents' Medication Guide](#):  
*Information including treatments and ways family members can be helpful to their children*
- [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Bipolar Disorder Resource Center](#):  
*Video clips and many other resource links for families and children*
- [National Institute of Mental Health — Bipolar Disorder Section](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: [nami.org/](http://nami.org/)
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: [dbsalliance.org/](http://dbsalliance.org/)