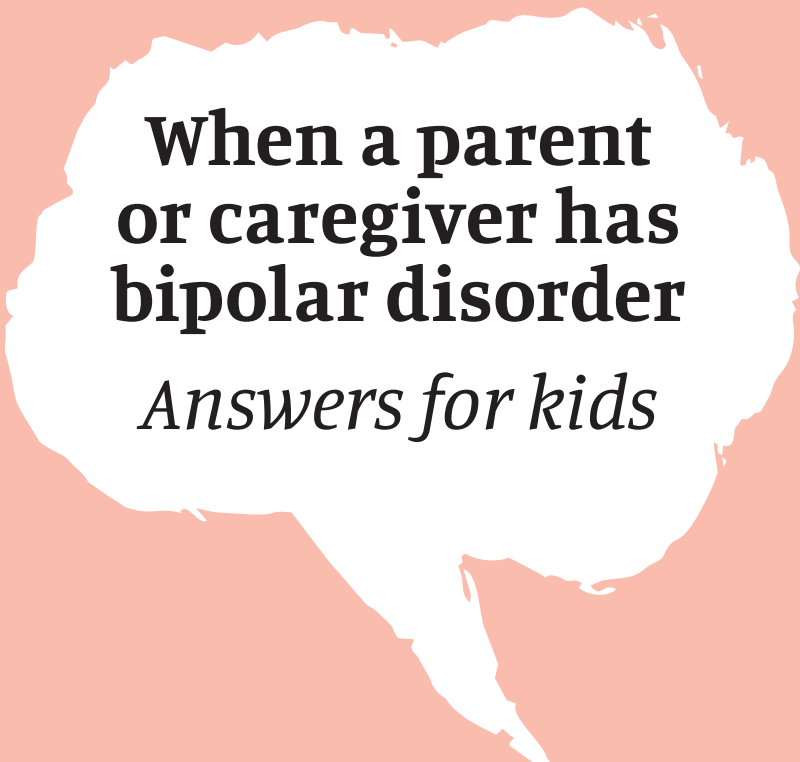




When a parent or caregiver has bipolar disorder

Answers for kids

YOU MIGHT HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS WHEN someone in your family is sick. If your parent or caregiver has bipolar disorder, you may feel like no one wants to talk about it. When you look for answers, the information from friends or other sources can be incorrect or even scary.

When talking about mental health, it's important to be open and honest. In this pamphlet, we'll try to answer your questions. We'll also give you some places where you can talk to someone or read more about bipolar disorder.

What is bipolar disorder?

- Bipolar disorder is an illness that affects how a person feels, thinks and acts.
- Our brains help us think, feel and act in certain ways. When people have bipolar disorder, their brain can go through changes that make them feel, think or act differently than they usually do.
- Bipolar disorder usually has two different phases: lows called low mood or depression and highs called high mood or mania.
- Having bipolar disorder is not a weakness. It is a medical illness that someone lives with, just like asthma or diabetes.
- Bipolar disorder can vary from person to person—it can be something that only affects the person a little bit, or it can be something that causes a lot of challenges for the person.

How does bipolar disorder affect my parent or caregiver?

- Bipolar disorder can affect people in many ways and often changes their emotions, what they want to do, their energy and how they view situations. While similar changes can be felt by anyone at certain points in their lives, the person with bipolar disorder often experiences periods where these feelings and behaviours happen more often and with more intensity than would be usual for them.
- The person's moods often cycle between phases—moving between low or depressed moods and high or manic moods.
- These phases aren't always the same length. Sometimes a phase may last for a while, and other times, they can be quite short. They also vary person to person.
- During a low phase, the person may feel sad, angry or worried. They may cry a lot.
- When people experience high moods, they may say they feel on top of the world or like they have superpowers. They may seem really excited, impatient or out of control.
- In a low mood, they might find it hard to do things like playing, talking to or seeing friends or family, or taking care of themselves (for example, showering, brushing teeth and getting dressed).

- In a high mood, they might be more interested in doing things. For example, they may say they can do anything, change the way they dress or want to spend more money.
- During a low mood, someone's energy level tends to be lower. They may talk slower, struggle to make decisions, get tired more easily or sleep longer than usual.
- In a high mood, the person might have more energy than usual. They may talk really fast, seem distracted or come up with lots of new ideas, or say they want less sleep.
- Both phases change the way the person sees the world.
- In a low phase, the person might think badly about life, themselves or other people. They will often have low self-esteem and low motivation.
- In a high phase, the person often thinks very highly of themselves, or feels increased confidence and abilities. They will often see the world more optimistically, but they may also be more paranoid or nervous around others.

What causes bipolar disorder?

- Nothing you did caused your parent or caregiver's bipolar disorder. You also cannot cause one phase to start or end.
- Chemicals in the brain that are off balance cause bipolar disorder. But we don't know for sure what makes the chemicals go off balance.
- In some cases, symptoms can appear suddenly for no known reason. In other cases, the symptoms seem to come after a life crisis, stress or illness.
- People with a family history of a mental condition have a higher chance of having bipolar or other mood and anxiety disorders.

Will my parent or caregiver's bipolar disorder ever go away?

- While there is no cure yet, the good news is that bipolar disorder is treatable.
- Most people with bipolar disorder manage very well with ongoing treatment and find that the illness is kept under control most of the time so they can lead a normal life.
- If the high or low moods do come back, they can be treated again.

How can my parent or caregiver get better?

- Many different treatments are available, including medicine and talk therapy:
 - Medicine helps the chemicals in the brain work like usual. It can help someone with bipolar disorder be able to think, feel and behave more like their usual self.
 - Talk therapy gets people with bipolar disorder to talk with a therapist about what they are experiencing. The therapy helps them learn new ways to cope and to think, feel and behave in more positive ways.
 - Sometimes the therapist will want to talk to you and your family too, which can also help the person with bipolar disorder get better. This can help you better understand what is happening.
- There are also other kinds of treatment. Many people combine different aspects of treatment to find what works best for them.

Is there anything I can do to make my parent or caregiver better?

- Family support is really important for people who have bipolar disorder. But it's the responsibility of adults, like doctors and other family members, to help your parent or caregiver get better.
- Letting your parent or caregiver know that you are there may help. You can do small things to show you care, like giving your parent or caregiver a card or photo or talking to them on the phone.
- Your parent or caregiver may be taking steps to feel better. But a lot of the work adults do to feel better can be hard for kids to see—like taking medicine, talking to a doctor or therapist, or going to the hospital. These steps will help to keep your parent or caregiver safe.

How will bipolar disorder affect me and my family?

- It can be very hard living with a parent or caregiver who has bipolar disorder because that person may do or say things that may make you feel bad, scared, sad, angry or confused. This is due to the phase the person with bipolar disorder is in and has nothing to do with anything you have done.
- People with bipolar disorder will often return to their usual moods between the high and low moods.

- As the high or low mood improves, your parent or caregiver will slowly start acting more like themselves again.
- Sometimes it can feel like a parent with bipolar disorder thinks mostly about themselves and doesn't care much about what you think or feel. Your feelings are important and it may be helpful to talk with someone you trust about these emotions.
- You deserve to feel loved, respected and cared for.

Will it happen to me? Can I catch bipolar disorder?

- Although bipolar disorder is an illness, someone can't catch it like a cold. Spending time with someone with bipolar disorder will not make you more likely to get it.
- Children who have a family member with bipolar often learn early about the importance of caring for your mental health and asking for help.
- To do this, you can focus on what makes you happy and helps you deal with stress, like your favourite activities, playing sports, doing hobbies and having fun with friends.
- If you are feeling very worried about getting bipolar disorder, talk to an adult you trust about these feelings.
- If you are worried about having really low moods or really high moods, you can also mention this to an adult you trust. You can also bring it up with your family doctor during your next visit.

Will my parent or caregiver die from bipolar disorder?

- No, bipolar disorder or periods of low mood do not cause the body to stop working like a heart attack might.

What should I do if I start to feel really upset?

- One of the best ways to stay happy and healthy is by being open and honest about how you're feeling. Your feelings are important to the people in your life, and other family members or trusted adults can often help. Sometimes just talking about your feelings is enough to help.
- If you are someone who likes planning and knowing what to expect, you may feel better if you make an action plan:
 - This is a plan you can make on your own or with your parents or caregivers before you see mood changes in the parent or caregiver with bipolar disorder.

- This plan can help you make decisions about what to do when you are scared.
- You can use the template from the Kids Help Phone website (search “fill-in-the-blank safety plan”) if you need a starting point.
- Action plans can include:
 - making a list of “signs” that tell the child that the parent is not doing well
 - having the name and number of an adult the child can call
 - writing down questions or worries
- You may have taken on more responsibility since your parent or caregiver entered a phase of bipolar symptoms (like doing more chores or helping with a sibling). If you can, try to do fun things with your friends and talk to an adult if you are taking on too much. This will help with your stress and upset feelings.
- If you are worried and feel you have no one to talk to, you can call the Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 or visit kidshelpphone.ca to talk to an adult who can help.
- If you need someone there fast because you are worried that someone might get hurt or is hurt, call 9-1-1.

What should I do if my parent or caregiver wants to hurt themselves?

- There are times when a parent or caregiver might feel so bad that they say things like “I want to die” or try to hurt themselves. Often, they don’t actually want to die—they are just overwhelmed—but it can be a scary thing to hear.
- Some people with bipolar disorder do try to hurt themselves when they think and feel this way.
- Suicide is a risk with bipolar disorder, but many people with bipolar disorder do not have suicidal thoughts.
- If your parent or caregiver seems like they may hurt themselves, you are not responsible in this situation. Instead, you should call 9-1-1 or a suicide crisis helpline like 9-8-8, or talk to a trusted adult.
- If you made a safety plan, look back over your steps and follow them (e.g., phone numbers you can call, an adult to contact, what to do in an emergency).

Who can I talk to?

Canada’s 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling or texting 9-8-8 anywhere in Canada.

988.ca

Other resources

Kids Help Phone

1 800 668-6868 or text 686868

kidshelpphone.ca

“My Fill-in-the-Blanks Safety Plan”

Visit kidshelpphone.ca and search for the title.

More information about bipolar disorder for children and families

- Speak to your family doctor.
- Call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at 416 535-8501 (select 2).
- Visit the CAMH Family Resource Centre (see back of pamphlet).

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this pamphlet, visit our website:

www.camh.ca

For other formats of this pamphlet, to order multiple copies or to order other publications, contact CAMH Publications:

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If you have questions or feedback about services at CAMH, contact the Patient and Family Experience (PFE) Office: 416 535-8501, ext. 32028; pfe@camh.ca

Family members can access the Family Resource Centre (FRC) and the RBC Patient and Family Learning Space (PFLS) for support, resources and help connecting to services.

1025 Queen St. W. (McCain Complex Care and Recovery Building)

FRC: 416 535-8501, ext. 32028; pfe@camh.ca

PFLS: 416 535-8501, ext. 33995; pfls@camh.ca;
www.camh.ca/pfls

To make a donation, please contact the CAMH Foundation:

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