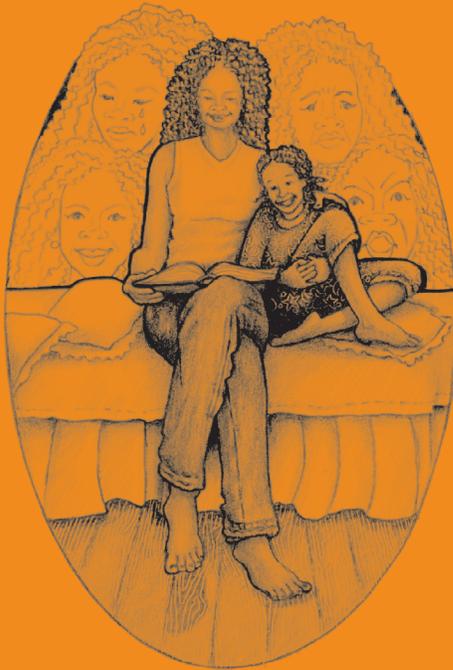


**when**  
a parent has bipolar  
disorder...

**what**  
kids want to know



CHILDREN HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS when someone in their family is sick. When children don't have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

When the family member's illness is bipolar disorder, it often becomes a secret that nobody talks about. All children need some explanation and support, geared to their age, to help them understand bipolar disorder.

Each parent and child's "beginning conversation" about bipolar disorder will be different depending on the child's age and ability to manage the information. You know your children best.

This brochure will help prepare you (whether you are the well parent, the parent with bipolar disorder, a grandparent or another adult in the child's life) to take the first step. If you have already started talking to a child about bipolar disorder, this brochure will give you more information to keep the conversation going. It lists common questions children have about their parent's bipolar disorder, as well as suggestions for how to answer their questions.

### **Questions kids have**

#### **What is bipolar disorder? How does bipolar disorder work?**

- Bipolar disorder is an illness that affects how a person feels, thinks and acts. It is a sickness in the brain.
- When people have bipolar disorder, their brain works differently from the usual way. Our brains help us to think, feel and act in certain ways. When people have bipolar disorder, they think, feel and act differently from how they do when they're well.
- There is almost always two different phases with bipolar disorder — lows called depression and highs called mania. During a low phase, the person is sad and often withdrawn. This is called depression. During a high phase, the person is either way too happy or way too angry. The person is very energetic and more outgoing than usual. This is called mania. At other times, the person is his or her usual self.
- Having bipolar disorder is not a weakness.
- Bipolar disorder can vary from person to person — it can be mild, or it can be a more difficult struggle.

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### Why does my dad act the way he does? How does it feel to have bipolar disorder? What goes on in my mom's head when she's not herself?

- Bipolar disorder causes people to act in ways that are different from how they usually act.
- Bipolar disorder is what causes the mood changes.
- The moods go in cycles.
- One parent said, "It was very hard because when I was high, I felt I could do anything. I didn't sleep or eat properly, and spent money excessively. The lows were very debilitating; I couldn't get out of bed, lost all interest in my work, in myself, my hobbies and my friends. The depression is the hard part. It makes it difficult to get out of bed."

### What does a "low mood," or depression, mean? What does it look like?

- When people have low moods, they may be sad and cry a lot. They might also feel impatient and irritable and get more angry than usual.
- A parent in a low mood might not want to do things with the family like playing, talking or driving them places.
- They may get tired more easily and spend a lot of time in bed.
- Sometimes the low moods make them have trouble concentrating or thinking.
- The low moods may make them worry a lot more than usual.
- Their thinking may seem strange.
- They might have a bad attitude about life, or not think highly of themselves.

### What does a "high mood", or mania, mean? What does it look like?

- When people have high moods, they may feel like they are on top of the world, that they have "super powers" and can do anything. One parent described it as feeling really, really excited about something all of the time.
- They might spend more money, dress or act differently and say unusual things.
- However, high moods can also make them feel impatient and angrier.
- They might talk really fast, make quick decisions and seem distracted.
- They might not want to sleep as much and may stay awake longer.

### How will bipolar disorder affect me? How will it affect my family?

- Bipolar disorder can affect the person with the illness, as well as other family members, in many different ways. (\*This would be an opportunity for the parent to discuss his or her own symptoms with the child.)
- It can be very hard living with a parent who has bipolar disorder because that person may do or say things that make children feel bad, scared, sad, angry and often confused. This can happen when the parent is in a high or low mood. Sometimes it can feel like a parent with mood swings thinks mostly about him- or herself and doesn't care much about what the kids think and feel.
- Bipolar disorder can make people feel ashamed so they don't always want to talk about it.
- Remember that people with bipolar disorder will have their usual moods between the high and low moods. As the high or low mood improves, the person slowly starts acting more like him- or herself again.

### What causes bipolar disorder? How does it start?

- 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.
- Bipolar disorder may also be genetic or inherited. However, it will usually not be passed to children. About one in 10 children of a parent with bipolar disorder will develop the illness. Nine out of 10 will not.
- It's unclear why, but some people get bipolar disorder more easily than others do.
- The child is not the cause of the parent's bipolar disorder.

### Will the bipolar disorder ever be fixed?

- 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.
- Almost everyone who gets treated will improve and some may get completely better. While there is always a chance that the bipolar disorder will come back, medicine can often prevent this from happening.
- If the mood problems do come back, they can be treated again.

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### How can my mom or dad get better?

- Many different treatments are available, including medicine and talk therapy.
- Medicine helps to make the chemicals in the brain work like usual. It can help people with bipolar disorder to be able to think, feel and behave more like their usual selves.
- 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 talk to the children and the family too, which can also help the person with bipolar disorder get better.
- There are also other kinds of treatment. If a child has questions about the help that a parent is getting, the child should ask to talk with a doctor, nurse or counsellor.

### Is there anything I can do to make my mom or dad better?

- Family support is really important for people who have bipolar disorder, but it is the adults (such as doctors and therapists) who are responsible for being the “helpers,” not the kids.
- Even though you can’t fix bipolar disorder, sometimes just knowing what your parent is going through, and understanding that he or she has an illness and can get better, can help your parent.

### Will it happen to me? Will I get it too?

- No one can ever know for sure if they will get bipolar disorder at some point in their lives.
- It’s natural to worry about this. Just like other illnesses, such as arthritis and diabetes, having bipolar disorder in your family might put you at greater risk of getting bipolar disorder yourself. But the chance of NOT getting the illness is far greater than the chance of getting the illness.
- It’s more important to focus on what you can do to help yourself deal with stress and lead a balanced life.
- If you are worried about getting bipolar disorder, try and find an adult that you trust to talk about your feelings.

### Is there anything I can do so that I don’t get bipolar disorder?

- One of the most important things that kids can do to stay healthy and happy is to be open about how they’re feeling. It’s healthy to let parents or other grown-ups in their life know what they’re going through.

- By talking to parents, another family member, teacher or other grown-ups who care, kids can get the help they need to feel better and solve problems in their lives.
- Some kids who have a parent with bipolar disorder don’t always talk about the times when they’re feeling angry, sad, scared or confused. They think they will just give their parents something else to worry about, or that others don’t want to hear about those feelings. But that’s just not true!
- Participating in sports, hobbies and other activities with healthy grown-ups and kids is important because it helps to have fun and feel good about yourself.
- If the child is worried that he or she might have really low moods or really high moods, the child can talk to an adult (parent, teacher and/or family doctor) about it.

### Can parents give it to other people? Is it like a cold? Can you catch bipolar disorder?

- No. Bipolar disorder isn’t like a cold. There’s no germ. It’s not contagious.
- There is no way of catching it. So a child could hang out with someone with bipolar disorder without ever having to worry about getting it.

### What should I do if I am scared? What can I do when I’m really worried about my parent who has bipolar disorder?

- Sometimes children feel better if they make an action plan with their parents before they see mood changes in the parent with bipolar disorder. This helps them make decisions about what to do when they are scared.
- Action plans can include:
  - making a list of “signs” that tell the child the parent is doing well
  - 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 and writing down questions or worries.
- If the child is worried and has no one to talk to, he or she can call the Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 to talk to an adult who can help.
- If there is an emergency and the child needs someone there fast because he or she is worried that someone might get hurt or is hurt, the child can call 911.
- Sometimes people with bipolar disorder need to be in the hospital for a while to get better. If this happens, the child should make sure to get all his or her questions answered. Understanding what is going on will help the child to worry less and feel better about the situation.

## Questions about self-harm

The questions we've listed touch on the major issues of interest to children. However, children can ask many different questions about family situations.

Once a conversation starts, it is difficult to know exactly what children might ask. Most parents are able to manage "spin-off" questions (e.g., Why is mom in the hospital? When will she come home?). The topic of suicide is harder to handle.

Many people with bipolar disorder do not have suicidal thoughts. This is why we do not include this material in question-and-answer format.

If questions arise around suicide or a parent self-harming, here are some ideas on how to share information with the child.

When children hear that someone is ill, they naturally wonder if the person might die. Children have asked if bipolar disorder can kill a person. While suicide is a risk with bipolar disorder, it is only one of the many symptoms a person might have. Children should understand that bipolar disorder does not cause the body to stop working, like a heart attack might. So no, it doesn't kill people. But there are times when people with bipolar disorder might feel so bad while depressed that they say things like, "I want to die." This can be a scary thing for a child to hear. And, once in a while, some people with bipolar disorder do try to hurt or kill themselves when they think and feel this way. When people feel this way, they need to see their doctor and/or therapist who can help.

### If discussing this issue with children, it is important to reassure them that:

- The parent has never wanted to hurt or kill him or herself. (Say this only if it's true.)
- If the parent were feeling so bad that he or she wanted to die, a doctor, therapist or other adult could help the parent keep safe and stop feeling that way.

### Need more help?

If you want more information about bipolar disorder and how it affects children and families, speak to your family doctor or call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) at 1 800 661-1111 or 416 595-6059 in Toronto.

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this brochure, please visit our website: [www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

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### Also available from CAMH:

*Can I Catch It like a Cold?*

*A Story to Help Children Understand a Parent's Depression*

(product code: P5596)

- This engaging, educational resource answers the key questions children have about depression. As depression is a major component of bipolar disorder, the book may be an ideal starting point to discuss the disorder.

*Bipolar Disorder: An Information Guide*

(product code: PM017)

- This booklet is written for people living with bipolar disorder and their families. It provides key information about the disorder and its treatment.

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