

# bipolar disorder

## effects on the family



**Bipolar disorder, a brain disorder characterized by extreme swings in moods, is a puzzling illness that not only affects the individual but their family and friends as well.**

**When bipolar disorder is not properly controlled with medical treatment, the family may experience:**

- Emotional distress such as guilt, grief, and worry
- Disruption in regular routines
- Having to deal with bizarre or reckless behaviour
- Financial stresses as a result of reduced income or spending sprees
- Strained marital or family relationships
- Changes in family roles
- Difficulty in maintaining relationships outside the family
- Health problems as a result of stress

**Family members experience various emotions as they learn to come to terms with having someone who has bipolar disorder.**

There is no right or wrong ways to feel. What is important is how you handle these emotions.

- At first, families may feel guilt, thinking that they somehow caused the person

to become ill. Young children are particularly vulnerable to thinking they somehow caused their parent to become ill. Every member of the family needs to understand that no one can cause a person to develop bipolar disorder; it is a medical illness.

- As with all serious illness, families will likely feel sorrow and grief. This is a natural reaction. We care about our family members and want them to be healthy and happy. Families sometimes feel they have lost the person they knew. However, mental illness such as bipolar disorder does not mean that the person cannot live a successful, happy life. What it means is that the individual and their family now have a new challenge they must face in life. With proper treatment and illness management, there is hope.
- Families also worry about their loved one, as a manic episode can cause a person to behave in a reckless manner or make unwise decisions. One way to help alleviate this worry is to develop a plan as to how the family will manage difficult times. When your family member is well, sit down and talk about how things will be handled in the event they become unwell. Developing a crisis plan can help to ensure that everyone knows what to expect should the person become unwell again.

### What Families Can Do

- Educate yourself about the illness
- Support your family member to manage their illness
- Believe in them, especially in times when they may not believe in themselves
- Continue to love them even when you want to give up

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- Children may fear that they will inherit the illness. Older children may fear that they may have to manage the care of their ill sibling as well as manage their own lives when their parents can no longer do the job. In any event, families need to learn to manage anxiety and to lead as fulfilling lives as possible.
- Disruption in routines may arise as a result of either manic or depressive episodes. Normal activities and chores may have to be set aside and left to be attended to on a later date when the episode subsides. Re-establishing a routine as soon as possible is important for staying well and reducing stress on all family members.
- Family roles can also be affected by bipolar disorder. Children may be forced to take on an adult role when their parent becomes ill; spouses may feel they can no longer rely on their partner to fulfill their share of household and family responsibilities.
- Financial difficulties, home and family neglect, constant tension and fear of symptoms returning can strain marital and family relationships. Symptoms such as irritability and poor judgement

can lead to increased arguments and confrontations.

- Families may find their social network starts shrinking in size. Friends and extended family may feel awkward about what to say or how to help the family. While not everyone in the family social network will be supportive, it is important to seek out those who are, as they are a valuable source of support. Going to a support group is another way to help reduce the sense of isolation a family often faces. Families report that having people to talk to helps them to better cope with the illness.

## **Bipolar disorder is a mental disorder that can have periods of wellness between episodes.**

Families often breathe a sigh of relief when symptoms are stabilized, but it is important to support the family member to continue with their medical treatment as well as watching for any signs of possible relapse. Early intervention can often ward off a full-blown relapse. With today's modern day treatments, there

is considerable hope for individuals and many, in spite of having a mental illness, go on to be very successful in their lives. Believing in your family member's recovery can make a big difference. The stress and emotional burdens of bipolar disorder can take their toll on families. Families caring for a person who has an ongoing mental illness are more susceptible to health related problems. Learning how to take care of yourself is a priority for anyone who is providing support to a person with bipolar disorder.

## **Education and support can greatly aid families who have a relative with bipolar disorder.**

More information on how you can help your family member effectively manage their illness can be found in the Family Toolkit, available at: [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

“*When my wife is in a manic state, I worry constantly about what might happen. I can cope as long as I know she's getting better. I can't give up hope.*”

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For information on support for people with mood disorders and their families please visit [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net)



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