

Bipolar Disorder

Effects on the Family

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder characterized by extreme changes in moods. It is an illness that not only affects the individual but their family and friends as well. Living with a person who has bipolar disorder involves learning how to cope with the difficulties that symptoms can create, supporting the person who is ill, and finding effective ways to cope.

Depending on the nature of an individual's illness and how well the illness is managed, the family can be affected in a variety of ways. When mood swings are mild, the family may experience some distress but, over time and with education about mental illness, they can learn to live with the demands of the illness. Caring for someone with more severe symptoms can be very stressful for the family, especially if they are not given the opportunity to develop the skills needed to cope with mental illness. It can be exhausting, especially for families with young children.

Bipolar disorder can impact families in the following ways:

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



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**

"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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Family members may experience a variety of emotions as they learn to come to terms with having someone who has bipolar disorder. There is no right or wrong way to feel. What is important is how you handle these emotions.

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, having a 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 to face.

Families also worry about their loved one, as a manic episode can cause a person to behave in a dangerous and/or risky manner. One way to help reduce this worry is to develop a plan for how the family will manage in difficult times. When your family member is feeling well, sit down and talk about how things will be handled in the event they become unwell. Having a crisis plan can help to make sure that everyone knows what to expect and what to do if the person become unwell again.

Children may fear that they will inherit the illness. Older children may fear that they must manage the care of their ill sibling when their parents can no longer do the job. In any event, families will benefit from learning to manage these concerns so that they don't get in the way of living happy and fulfilling lives.



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

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Routines can be disrupted because of either manic or depressive episodes. Normal activities and chores may have to be set aside until the person is doing better. Re-establishing routines as soon as possible is important for staying well and reducing stress on all family members.

Financial trouble, home and family neglect, constant tension and fear of symptoms returning can strain relationships within the family. Symptoms such as irritability and impaired judgement can lead to arguments and confrontations.

Families may find their social network starts shrinking in size. Friends and extended family may feel uneasy 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 cope.

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 while 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, despite having a mental illness, go on to thrive in life. Believing in your family member's recovery can make a big difference. The stress of bipolar disorder can take its toll on families. Families caring for a person who has an ongoing mental illness are more susceptible to health problems themselves. Learning how to take care of yourself is a priority for anyone who is providing support to a person with bipolar disorder.



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