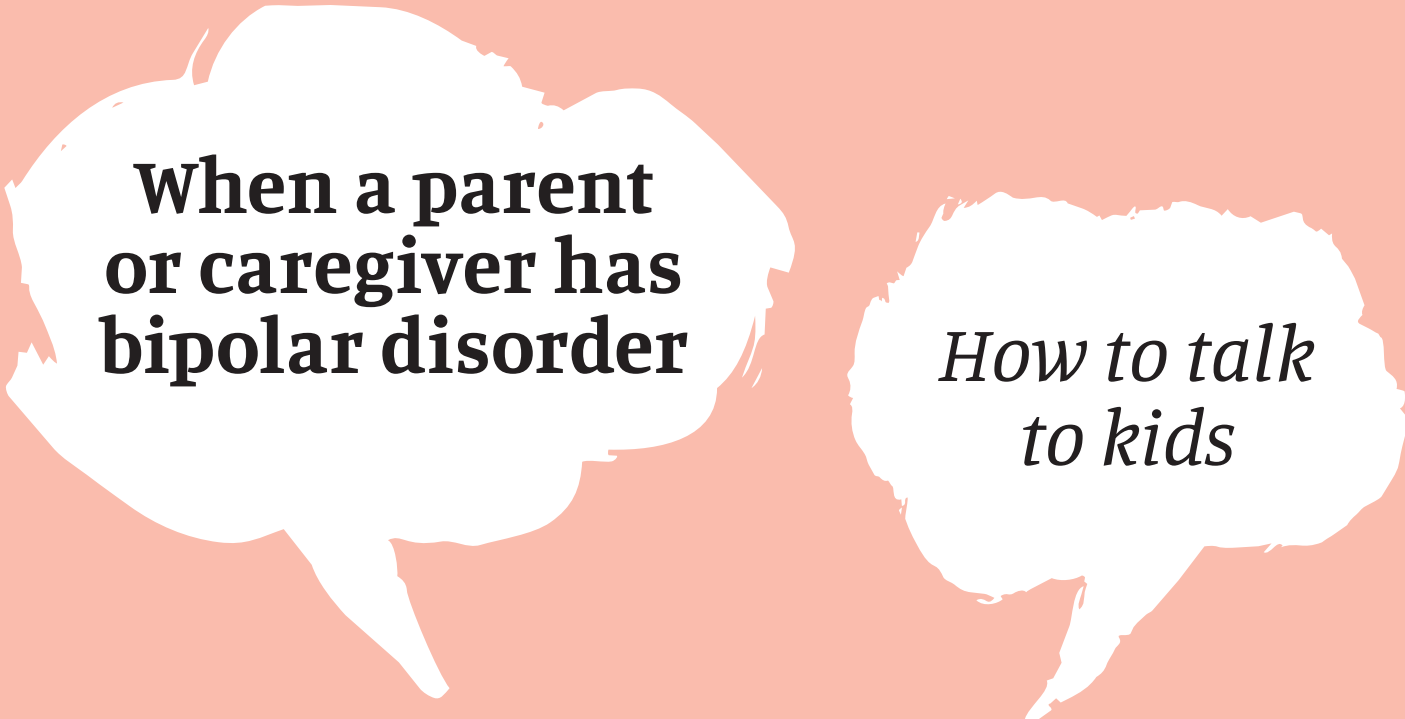




When a parent or caregiver has bipolar disorder

How to talk to kids

KIDS HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS WHEN someone in their family is sick. When their parent or caregiver has bipolar disorder, it often becomes a secret that nobody talks about. When children don't have answers to their questions, they may turn to social media or peers and access information that could be incorrect or scary.

This pamphlet prepares you to talk about bipolar disorder with the child in your life. It lists common questions children have about bipolar disorder, as well as suggestions for how you can answer them.

Every family's beginning conversation about bipolar disorder will be different depending on the child's age and ability to manage the information. You may want to adjust this information according to your child. You know your child best.

Questions about bipolar disorder

Use these notes to help respond to your child's questions.

What is bipolar disorder?

- Give the child clear facts about bipolar disorder:
 - Bipolar disorder is an illness that affects how a person feels, thinks and acts.
 - 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?

- Listen to the child's concerns and provide information about bipolar disorder:
 - Bipolar disorder causes people to act in ways that are different from how they usually act.
 - The person's moods often come in cycles. The two different phases of depression and mania means that the person's mood may be different during different periods.
- You can give the child specific examples of symptoms their parent or caregiver might have, or you can draw from some of these examples:
 - The different phases affect emotions:
 - During a low phase, the person may be sad and cry a lot. They might also feel impatient and irritable. They may get angrier or worry more.
 - When people have high moods, they may feel excited and like they are on top of the world. But they can also feel impatient or out of control.
- The phases can also affect what the parent or caregiver can or wants to do:
 - In a low mood, they might not want to do things with the family like play, talk or drive places. It may be difficult to do basic things like shower, brush teeth or get dressed.

- In a high mood, they might feel like they can do anything or want to do many things at once. They may also want to spend more money, say unusual things and dress or act differently.
- The phases might also affect their energy:
 - During a low mood, they may get tired more easily, talk slower and spend a lot of time in bed.
 - They may have trouble concentrating or thinking during each phase: During a low mood, they may struggle to pay attention and feel their thoughts are moving slowly, while during a high mood their attention might quickly switch from thing to thing.
- Their attitude and the way they think about life will often change depending on the phase:
 - In a low phase, the person might think badly about life, themselves or other people.
 - In a high phase, the person often thinks very highly of themselves and feels increased confidence and abilities. They will often see the world more optimistically, but at times they might be more paranoid or nervous around others as well.
- If you are the parent or caregiver experiencing bipolar disorder, you can remind the child of how you feel about them even if you are acting differently some days.
- Reassure the child:
 - The behaviour is not their fault and they do not deserve to be treated badly.
 - Once the phase is over or the parent or caregiver has received treatment, they will often act more like themselves again.

What causes bipolar disorder?

- Explain to the child:
 - Nothing they did caused their parent or caregiver's bipolar disorder or caused one phase or another.
 - 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.

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, and most people with bipolar disorder manage very well with ongoing treatment.
- Treatment can happen as many times as the person needs.

How can my parent or caregiver get better?

- Many different treatments are available:
 - Medicine helps the chemicals in the brain work so that someone with bipolar disorder may 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 their experiences and to learn more positive ways to cope, think, feel and behave.
 - 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. 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?

- Remind the child:
 - Family support is really important for people who have bipolar disorder, but adults are the ones responsible for helping.
 - The child can let their parent or caregiver know that they are there. Even small things like a card or phone conversation can help.

How will bipolar disorder affect me and my family?

- Listen to the child's concerns. Acknowledge that:
 - It can be very hard living with a parent or caregiver who has bipolar disorder because that person may do or say things that make children feel scared, sad, angry or confused. This is not the child's fault.
 - Sometimes it can feel like a parent with mood changes thinks mostly about themselves and doesn't care much about what the child thinks and feels.

- Remind the child:
 - As the high or low mood improves, the parent or caregiver's usual moods will often return. They will slowly start acting more like themselves again.
 - The child deserves to feel loved, cared for and respected.

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

- Reassure the child:
 - Although bipolar disorder is an illness, they can't catch it like a cold. Spending time with someone with bipolar disorder will not make a person more likely to get it.
- Explain to the child:
 - Children who have a family member with bipolar often learn early about the importance of caring for their mental health and asking for help.
 - To stay mentally healthy, they can do things that help lower stress, like talking with friends, playing sports and other favourite activities.
- Address the child's specific worries:
 - If they are worried about getting bipolar disorder, talk to them further about their feelings or plan for them to talk to another adult they trust.
 - If the child is worried that they themselves are experiencing really low moods or really high moods, talk to them about their symptoms and make a plan to bring it up to their family doctor or other trusted adult.

Will my parent or caregiver die from bipolar disorder?

- Tell the child:
 - 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?

- Listen to the child's concerns and tell them:
 - 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. Their feelings are important.

- 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 not doing well, writing down questions and worries or having the name and number of an adult the child can call.
- If they have taken on more responsibility since recent mood changes in their parent or caregiver, they may feel more stressed and upset lately. Playing with friends and keeping up with their favourite activities can help ease these feelings. They can also talk to an adult they trust.
- If the child feels they have no one to talk to, they can reach out to Kids Help Phone.

Questions about self-harm

Once you start a conversation about bipolar disorder, it is difficult to know exactly what children might ask. “Spin-off” questions (e.g., “Why is my mom in the hospital? When will she come home?”) might be something you are able to manage, but the topics of suicide and self-harm can be harder to handle. Use these notes to help you talk about them with a child.

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

- Explain to the child:
 - There are times when a parent or caregiver might feel so bad that they say things like, “I want to die.” Often, they don’t actually want to die—they are just overwhelmed—but it can still be scary.
 - 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.
- Help the child prepare for this situation:
 - They are not responsible in this situation. Instead, they need to call 9-1-1 or a suicide crisis helpline like 9-8-8, or talk to a trusted adult.

- Offer to create a safety plan with the child (e.g., phone numbers they can call, an adult to contact, what to do in an emergency). You can use the template from [Kids Help Phone](#) if you need a starting point.
- Explain what the child’s parent or caregiver is doing to get help, such as receiving treatment, going to the hospital or taking medication.

Who can I talk to?

Canada’s 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling or texting 9-8-8 anywhere in Canada. Visit [988.ca](#).

Other resources

Kids Help Phone

1 800 668-6868, text 686868 or visit [kidshelpphone.ca](#)

“My Fill-in-the-Blanks Safety Plan”

Visit [kidshelpphone.ca](#) and search for the title.

Bipolar Disorder: An Information Guide

This book, written by CAMH Bipolar Clinic staff, offers more in-depth information on bipolar disorder for an adult audience. You can use this guide to inform your own knowledge of bipolar disorder and your discussions with family and other support systems.

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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<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications>

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:

416 979-6909

foundation@camh.ca

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