

TEENS AND BIPOLAR DISORDER

Patricia Garel, M.D., Psychiatrist, and François Maranda, M.D., Psychiatrist, CHU Sainte-Justine

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is mood disorder that is characterized by alternating up (mania) and down (depression) phases. Professionals talk about bipolar mood disorder when referring to this illness, which affects 1% to 3% of teens. The disorder can begin with either manic or depressive symptoms. The ups alternate with the downs. People can even feel both extremes at almost the same time. However, depressive episodes are much more frequent, which can make it hard to differentiate this disorder from major depression.

Bipolar disorder is considered to be a disease, but it is not really like other diseases, because it alters a person's judgment. However, like other diseases, it must be explained, demystified, and treated quickly. The teenager and his family must understand the issues involved in both the illness and the treatment. There is no reason for needless suffering or isolation. Bipolar disorder in teens can be treated.

Warning signs

Factors that can contribute to an increased likelihood of a teenager developing bipolar disorder:

- Having a family member who suffers from bipolar disorder;
- Having a family member who has committed suicide.

The diagnosis of bipolar disorder is not based on a single symptom, but on a variable set of symptoms that change over time within a given context. A teenager who suffers from bipolar disorder can present with some of the symptoms associated with this illness.

Symptoms

During the manic phase, a teen who suffers from bipolar disorder will exhibit some of the following symptoms:

- Severe mood changes, as compared to people in his own age group and environment. The teen may be particularly happy, annoying, or very irritable;
- Unrealistically high self-esteem (grandiosity). For example, he may believe that he has a special relationship with God;
- Increased energy and the ability to function for several days with little or no sleep without feeling tired;
- Increased speaking rate: talking too much and too fast, changing subjects very frequently, and unwilling to be interrupted;
- Extreme distractibility: attention constantly switches from one thing to another;
- Risk-taking with no fear of consequences: such as jumping off a roof, believing that he can't be hurt.

During the depressive phase, a teen who suffers from bipolar disorder will exhibit some of the following symptoms:

- Sustained difficulty in relationships with family and friends;
- Abnormal irritability and apathy toward everyday things;
- Poor personal hygiene and not keeping his room tidy;
- Delinquent behaviour: such as skipping school, violent behaviour (verbal and physical), and alcohol and drug abuse;
- Appetite changes;
- Attention and concentration problems;
- Sleep problems: insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping all the time);
- Sadness disguised as irritability and aggressiveness;
- Suicidal behaviour or pervasive suicidal thoughts – wanting to die in order to end the suffering.

Some of these signs are also found in other problems that affect teens, such as drug abuse, delinquency, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and even schizophrenia. A thorough evaluation by a child psychiatrist is often required in order to clarify the situation, reach a diagnosis, and begin appropriate treatment.

Treatment

Effective treatment for bipolar disorder usually includes educating the teenager and his family with respect to the illness, along with medication and some type of psychotherapy.

1. Pharmacological treatment

The doctor will prescribe one or more medications that act on neurotransmitters (mood stabilizers, antidepressants, antipsychotics, or other medication). Neurotransmitters are the chemicals that are used by neurons to communicate and carry out brain functions. This communication is altered during the depressive phase. The purpose of the medications is to properly restore this communication. You should know that these medications don't start to work right away. Sometimes you have to wait a few weeks for them to reach their full effect. When they are effective, they help the teen to gradually get his life back in balance in the following areas:

- Sleep;
- Appetite;
- Normal energy level;
- Normal concentration level (this sometimes takes longer);
- Enjoying activities again;
- Realistic plans;
- Interest in pursuing studies, etc.

2. Psychological treatment

Psychotherapy helps the teenager to accept his illness, adapt to stress better, rebuild his self-esteem, and carry on better relationships with others.

Cognitive therapies aimed at correcting the misconceptions and false perceptions surrounding depression are effective, and they complement the pharmacological treatment. Other types of therapy (group therapy, analytically-oriented therapy, etc.) may also be indicated in certain cases.

It is important to consider a healthier lifestyle for any teenager who suffers from depression, particularly in terms of schedule, diet, sleep, exercise, and not taking drugs (especially marijuana).

Where to go for help

Roles of the various people involved in helping a teenager who suffers from bipolar disorder

Parents are often the first ones to notice a problem with their child's functioning. Although the parent-child bond can sometimes influence their perceptions, they are still in the best position to observe what is happening. Therefore, it is important for them to express their fears or doubts to a qualified person. Parents are always essential in the process of evaluation and care.

The family doctor is often the first person to be consulted for the various physical symptoms that go along with depression (fatigue, pain, etc.). He will carry out a medical workup in order to rule out any physical ailment that may explain the symptoms (thyroid problem, infection, anaemia, etc.), and will pursue the evaluation with the teenager and his parents. He can then request a consultation with a psychiatrist, or begin treatment after a reasonable amount of time.

A psychiatrist is a doctor who specializes in mental disorders, and is the best person to coordinate all aspects of treatment.

School practitioners (nurse, psychologist, social worker) are often the first to be consulted by the youngster. They play a crucial role in welcoming, supporting, and caring for the teenager in distress. They will steer him to the appropriate specialists.

The teenager can also meet with and confide in a **trusted teacher**, who can advise and support him in getting help from a doctor or an organization.

The CSSS youth mental health teams are specialists in the problems that teens face. Don't hesitate to contact them.

Organizations Revivre, Kids Help Phone and Tel-Jeunes provide information and support for clients and their families. They are available anytime for information concerning resources, referrals, help, and support at various levels.

Siblings and friends can help!

A teenager who is not feeling well will often confide in a friend, sister, brother, etc. who can help him through the bad time, and who will not allow him to be alone or isolated. They can put him in touch with an adult who can take the necessary steps.

If you recognize some of the signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder in your teenager, consult a general practitioner or a child psychologist. Recognizing the illness and having it treated quickly by qualified professionals is the best thing you can do.

youthservices@revivre.org

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514 REVIVRE (738-4873)

Toll free: 1 866 REVIVRE

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