UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL ILLNESS
IN YOUR FAMILY

for young people who have a family member with

Bipolar Disorder

A REASON TO HOPE. THE MEANS TO COPE.
BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

BC SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY FOUNDATION
SUPPORTING THE BC SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

This booklet was adapted from materials developed by Sabin Sebastion MD, Birmingham, Alabama and the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

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"I can't understand her, my mom is sometimes so happy and excited about everything, then at other times she gets so sad that she doesn't even eat or sleep well."

- Taylor

"It's such a drag! I love softball, and I made the school team. I want dad to come and watch my games. But I am afraid - what if he suddenly becomes like he sometimes does. He may decide to coach my team or something like that."

- Megan

"It's hard to say this and I am afraid my friends will find out. But sometimes my brother says strange stuff like he's God or that he is a king and sometimes even hears voices talking to him..."

- Liam

So what is happening with all these family members?
They all have an illness called:

Bipolar Disorder

What does that mean?

Don't worry! When you are done reading this, you will know as much, or even more than some grown-ups about **bipolar disorder**.

First, let's find out what it means to have bipolar disorder.

If you know someone who has **bipolar disorder**, you may already have some idea about what they are going through.

Maybe you've noticed that sometimes they act in ways that don't make sense to you.

Maybe they've told you a bit about what it is like for them to live with **bipolar disorder**.

Let's try to understand what it might feel like to have this illness:

Imagine you are doing alright, and then for no reason you start to feel kind of strange. You begin to feel like you are a rock star - *even though you don't know how to hold a guitar and you've never sung a song before!*

You get all these ideas in your head and you can't stop thinking about them.

You want *everyone* to know about these ideas,
but when you tell other people, they only give you **strange looks**!

You seem to have so much energy that you don't even need to sleep.
You keep making plan after plan, but you don't have time to finish any of them.

At other times, you get very irritable and angry.
People don't seem to understand you at all.

Then there are times when things get *really bad*.
You may start hearing voices that others cannot hear
or see things they cannot see.

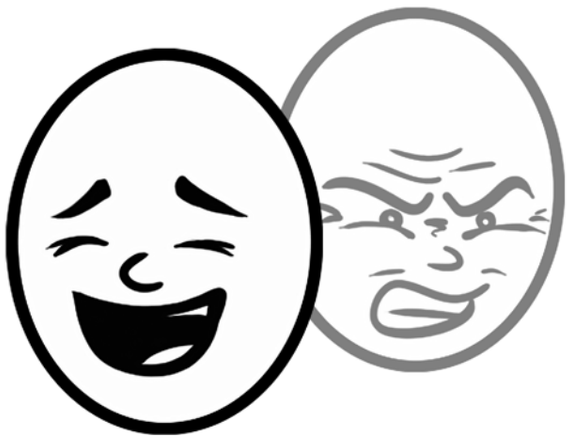
***But what makes it worse,* is that you know there is another side to this roller coaster ride!**

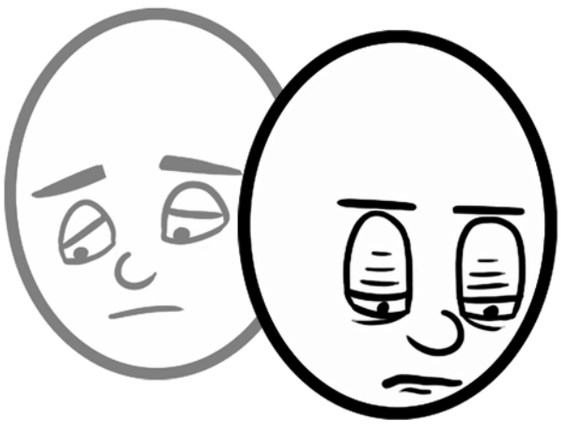
You know that sooner or later, you will also go through times when you feel *worthless, useless, sad* and *miserable.*

It is no fun to be ill!

Now you know what it can be like to have bipolar disorder.
Like other mental illnesses, **bipolar disorder** is an illness of the brain. It shows itself by periods of ***mania*** and periods of ***depression.***

Mania is when the person feels ***full of energy.*** They might get *really excited*, talk *really* fast and believe they are *extra special*. **They might also get really angry and annoyed.** Sometimes they hear voices and see things that aren't really there.





Depression is when the person has *very low energy.* **They are sad and unhappy for long periods of time, even though there is no reason to be that sad.** They might stop doing things they enjoy and taking care of themselves.

Sometimes, a person can experience *both* **mania** and **depression** at the same time.

Remember, they aren't choosing to act this way.
No one wants to be ill!

Commonly Asked Questions

If you find yourself with lots of questions about ***bipolar disorder****, you're not alone.*

Here are some questions people often ask:

What causes bipolar disorder?

Just like the body, the brain can get sick too, but you can't catch bipolar disorder from someone else like you catch a cold.

Mental illnesses like bipolar disorder are caused by a combination of different things. A person's genes can make them more likely to develop bipolar disorder. **Genes are the building blocks that make us who we are and determine things like the colour of our hair or eyes.**

If a person has genes that make them more likely to have bipolar disorder, things that happen in their life can add to this and cause them to get bipolar disorder or make the illness worse.

For example, if someone goes through a difficult event like the death of a loved one or a car accident.

Using drugs and alcohol can also make someone more likely to develop **bipolar disorder** if they already have genes that make them at risk.

Will I get bipolar disorder?

Just because you have a family member with **bipolar disorder**, this does not mean you will get **bipolar disorder**. ***If you are worried about yourself or notice any changes in your thoughts, feelings or behaviour, talk to an adult you trust.***

Commonly Asked Questions

Is it your fault? Absolutely NOT!

Sometimes kids wonder if they did something to make their family member ill or if they could've done something to stop their family member from having bipolar disorder.

But it's important to remember – kids are not the cause of these illnesses! Bipolar disorder is no one's fault.

Will they get better?

Just like many other illnesses, there are ways to treat bipolar disorder.

There are medications that help people with bipolar disorder feel better.

*Counselling or therapy can also help people with **bipolar disorder** understand their illness and learn new ways to deal with problems.*

People with bipolar disorder have to take treatment for a long time, usually their whole lives.

They may become ill, get better, become ill again and then get better again.

Even though bipolar disorder may sound like a scary illness to have, with treatment, many people with bipolar disorder are able to live happy lives.

Remember

Here are some important things to remember if someone in your family has a mental illness like bipolar disorder...

It's not your fault

No one can cause another person to have a mental illness.

Your feelings are okay

You may have a lot of different feelings. It's okay to feel sad, lonely, angry, confused or however you feel. Other people feel the same way.

Talk to someone you trust

Share your feelings with someone you trust – a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, counsellor or teacher.

Take care of yourself

Find things you enjoy doing. Play a sport, read, bake, dance, make art, spend time with friends, anything you find fun that helps you relax.

It can get better

With medication and help from doctors, counsellors, family and friends, people with mental illness do get better.

It's no joke

People should never make fun of mental illness.

Knowledge is power

It can be helpful to learn more about mental illness, so you understand what is happening for your family member. Then it won't seem so scary or confusing.

Remember the Three C's

I can't **C**ause it
I can't **C**hange it
I can **C**are for myself

Where Can I Learn More?

The following resources have more information about mental illness and how to cope when someone in your family has a mental illness:

Kids & Teens in Control Groups
Support and education groups for children and youth ages 8-18 who have a family member with mental illness.
bcss.org/kidsincontrol

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness)
Information and videos about mental illness for young people who have a parent with mental illness.
copmi.net.au/kids-young-people

BC Schizophrenia Society
Information about schizophrenia and other mental illnesses.
bcss.org

HeretoHelp
Information and resources about mental health and substance use.
heretohelp.bc.ca

Need Help?

Kids Help Phone
Call *1-800-668-6868* or Text *CONNECT* to *686868*
kidshelpphone.ca

KUU-US Crisis Line – First Nations and Indigenous specific crisis line
Call *1-800-588-8717*

YouthinBC – Online crisis chat service
youthinbc.com

Crisis Centre Suicide Line
Call *1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)*

Things I Can Do To Help Myself

In an emergency I can call:

If I need someone to talk to I can call:

If I am looking for information I can call:

One person I can go to for help is:

Times when I may need help:

Things I can do to help myself feel better:

Notes

For more information on supporting families with mental illness, please contact:

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society
1100 – 1200 West 73rd Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6P 6G5

Phone: **604-270-7841**
Toll Free: **1-888-888-0029**
Email: **info@bcss.org**
Website: **www.bcss.org**

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