

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 38

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BIPOLAR DISORDER IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

Children and teenagers with Bipolar Disorder have manic and/or depressive symptoms. Some may have mostly depression and others a combination of manic and depressive symptoms. Highs may alternate with lows.

Manic symptoms include:

- severe changes in mood-either unusually happy or silly, or very irritable, angry, agitated or aggressive
- unrealistic highs in self-esteem - for example, a teenager who feels all powerful or like a superhero with special powers
- great increase in energy and the ability to go with little or no sleep for days without feeling tired
- increase in talking - the adolescent talks too much, too fast, changes topics too quickly, and cannot be interrupted
- distractibility - the teen's attention moves constantly from one thing to the next
- repeated high risk-taking behavior; such as, abusing alcohol and drugs, reckless driving, or sexual promiscuity

Depressive symptoms include:

- irritability, depressed mood, persistent sadness, frequent crying
- thoughts of death or suicide
- loss of enjoyment in favorite activities
- frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches or stomach aches
- low energy level, fatigue, poor concentration, complaints of boredom
- major change in eating or sleeping patterns, such as oversleeping or overeating

Some of these signs are similar to those that occur in teenagers with other problems such as drug abuse, delinquency, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or even schizophrenia.

Research has improved the ability to diagnose Bipolar Disorder in children and teens. Bipolar Disorder can begin in childhood and during the teenage years, although it is usually diagnosed in adult life. The illness can affect anyone. However, if one or both parents have Bipolar Disorder, the chances are greater that their children may develop the disorder. Family history of drug or alcohol abuse also may be associated with greater risk for Bipolar Disorder.

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Teenagers with Bipolar Disorder can be effectively treated. Treatment for Bipolar Disorder usually includes education of the patient and the family about the illness, mood stabilizing medications such as lithium, valproic acid, or “atypical antipsychotic,” and psychotherapy. Mood stabilizing medications often reduce the number and severity of manic episodes, and also help to prevent depression. Psychotherapy helps the child understand himself or herself, adapt to stresses, rebuild self-esteem and improve relationships.

The diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder in children and teens is complex and involves careful observation over an extended period of time. A thorough evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist identify Bipolar Disorder and start treatment.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

- # 3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs,
- #4 The Depressed Child,
- #6 Children Who Can't Pay Attention (ADHD),
- #33 Conduct Disorder,
- #52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation,
- #55 Understanding Violent Behavior in Children,
- #72 Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and
- #00 Definition of a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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