Bipolar Disorder in Teens

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Teens and Bipolar

Parents often see their teenager as moody, irritable, lacking concentration and making poor/ impulsive decisions. To some degree, these symptoms are typical for any teenager. Being a teenager means facing new experiences and having strong emotional reactions to these situations. Being the parent of a teenager means living with someone that is reacting to new conditions without the ability to manage their feelings very well at all times. It is problematic for each of you.

This experience becomes more difficult if the moodiness, poor concentration and poor judgment stretch beyond typical symptoms to symptoms that meet criteria for bipolar disorder. A teenager with bipolar must meet each challenge of adolescence with the added stress of a chronic mental illness.

Battling Teenage Bipolar

You want what is best for your teen. You want to support and advocate. Following the tips below can make the bipolar experience more bearable. Here's how:

- **Know what you are dealing with**. Bipolar disorder in children and teenagers is often misdiagnosed and mistreated. In teens, bipolar disorder can look like many other mental health disorders including depression, attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), borderline personality disorder and schizophrenia. The gray area is broad as combinations of disorders can present as bipolar. Adding to the confusion, your teen might not meet criteria for bipolar because they have not had a manic or hypomanic episode as these are commonly seen after the depressive symptoms.
- **Seek treatment**. Some issues and scenarios of adolescence can be addressed and resolved within the family; bipolar disorder is not one of them. The impulsivity and poor judgment usually found in teenagers becomes amplified with bipolar disorder. Risk-taking and potentially dangerous behaviors are more likely in teens with bipolar. Finding reputable mental health treatment is critical. Follow recommendations of the mental health professionals and consider different levels of care depending on the needs of your teen.
- **Provide separation**. You know that being a teenager is a very confusing and isolating experience. Imagine how a bipolar diagnosis compounds the situation. Bipolar disorder in teens can create the feeling of a lack of acceptance and a notion that people are trying to change them. Let your teen know that it is the bipolar, not them, that you wish to improve. Building the separation between your child and the bipolar helps to provide a stronger sense of self. The bipolar is part of him but it does not define him.

- **Provide support**. Spend time focusing on the positives and strengths that your teen possesses. Rather than waiting for unwanted symptoms to reappear, finding ways to bring the assets to the foreground serves to make the negatives seem less intense. Sports, art, dance and hobbies can provide an outlet for your teen both creatively and physically. These will become positive coping skills that your teen can benefit from for a lifetime. Experiment to find activities that suit your teen's symptoms.
- **Know when to back off**. Parenting any teen is frustrating, at times. Knowing when to push and when to

pull back is necessary and will help the relationship in the long-term. Meanwhile, practicing appropriate self-care will help you stay fresh and avoid burnout.

Conclusion

Your teen with bipolar will have many challenges in life and those will be your challenges as well. Work hard to find the best information and treatment for your teen. Then, work smart to be supportive to your teen and yourself. Together, you and your teenager can find the symptom relief you seek.