Over the next few minutes, we are going to talk about what it’s like to have a family member with Bipolar Disorder. If you are the brother or sister of someone with this disorder, then this information is especially important for you. You probably have tons of questions about what your family is going through. Listening to this information will give you some good ideas for how to deal with this, and help you understand a little more about Bipolar Disorder.

First, I would like to share with you a poem called “My Own Waves” that was written by a boy named Travis who has Bipolar Disorder. Travis wrote this when he was 11 years old. His poem is about what he thinks it’s like to have Bipolar Disorder. As you listen to this, remember that your brother or sister could be going through the same things Travis is talking about.

“I live my life on the beach's waters
riding waves I have to control.
My medicine is my surfboard
my emotions are in my soul.

When the wave is real high
I am the happiest guy
I can do anything, even fly

When the wave is low
my mind goes slow
nothing is good
I just don't want to go
Now I can surf
I use the surfboard
I use what I learned
about changing my thoughts

In my life there are no more
tidal waves
only me surfing forever
on medium waters.”
(Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002, Gallery – Literature, ¶ 6)

Travis’ poem tells you what it’s like to go through the different parts of Bipolar Disorder. In this poem, you heard him say that his life is like riding on waves that he has to control. Kids who have Bipolar Disorder, like Travis, don’t always feel just “normal.” They sometimes feel really happy or strong like a superhero, and sometimes they feel really sad, upset, or down. The feelings they go through can change a lot, and make it seem, as Travis said it, like riding on high and low waves. Travis talked about his medicine in his poem and called it his “surfboard.” Some kids take medicine to help them with these feelings. The medicine can help them feel more normal. Travis was talking about his medicine making him feel more normal when he wrote “only me surfing forever on medium waters.” Now that he is taking medicine, he feels like he is on medium waters, instead of on those high and low waves he felt he was on before.

Hopefully this poem gives you a better idea of what your sister or brother feels like as they go through having Bipolar Disorder. You’ve probably seen your sibling acting weird or fighting with your parents, or maybe they’ve even done something to hurt you, and you wondered why. The reason is probably that they are going through one of those high or low moments we talked about. If your brother or sister has been mean to you or hurt or upset you, you shouldn’t think that they don’t love you or that they want to hurt you. Remember that most of the time, the way they act is controlled
by the way the disorder makes them feel. Blaming yourself for what your brother or sister does or says to you is not the answer. What you should try to do, although it can be really hard, is give your love, understanding, and support to your brother or sister. Even though the first thing you might want to do is get mad at them, it’s very important that you try to be patient and loving with them.

A good thing to do is to talk to your parents. You need to let them know how you’re feeling and what is going on with you. Your mom or dad can probably come up with ways to help you and your brother or sister get along. You also need to talk to your parents if you ever feel like you’re being ignored. Sometimes when your mom and dad need to deal with what your sibling is going through, it may seem like they aren’t paying attention to you. What’s probably going on is just that sometimes it can be hard for your parents to deal with what your sibling goes through and all the normal things a family has to deal with, all at the same time. So, what you should do is talk to them about how you feel and together you can all come up with ideas to help. One thing you and your parents can do to make sure you don’t feel ignored, is set aside some one-on-one time that is just for you and them.

Another thing to remember is that it’s always better to get your parents’ attention in good ways. Just because you may see your sibling getting their attention by saying or doing hurtful things doesn’t mean that you should do it too. If you’re feeling ignored, and you want to do something to make them put their focus on you, try to think of good things you can do. You could share with them an art or craft you’ve made or show them a homework assignment or test that you did really well on. Just talking with your mom and dad about what you like to do and what you’re interested in is another good way to spend some quality time with them.

Handling what goes on at home when you have a sibling with Bipolar Disorder can be very hard. It can also be hard at school. If you and your brother or sister go to the same school, there are times when you might not know how to react. A lot of times you might feel like you need to watch over them and protect them. Other times you might actually feel embarrassed by them. These are all normal things to feel.
Remember when I said that the way your brother or sister acts is usually controlled by the way the disorder makes them feel? That is why they might act in ways that seem strange to you at school. It is possible that this is embarrassing to you or that your friends make you feel embarrassed. What you should try to do, though, is be as supportive as possible of your sibling and let your friends know why they are acting that way. When kids make fun of other kids who have a disorder, usually it’s because they don’t know about the disorder or understand it. By knowing about Bipolar Disorder yourself, you can help other kids to understand it as well. By doing this, you could actually be protecting your brother or sister from the hurtful things kids can say sometimes when they don’t understand.

One last thing I want you to know is that your brother or sister can get better. There is a lot of help out there for kids with Bipolar Disorder. Sometimes, it is just a matter of taking some medicine. With whatever help your sibling is getting, your sister or brother can feel better, just like Travis talked about in his poem. Just remember that your love and support for your brother or sister can go a long way in helping both of you to be happy.

The material presented in this podcast was based on several sources. These sources were:

- If your Adolescent has Depression or Bipolar Disorder: An Essential Resource for Parents by Dwight L. Evans and Linda Wasmer Andrews, 2005
- The “Bipolar Disorder” website by the CopeCareDeal organization, 2008
- The “Gallery – Literature ” website by the Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002
- Treating and Preventing Adolescent Mental Health Disorders by The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, 2007
- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision by the American Psychiatric Association, 2000
- The “Child and Adolescent Bipolar Disorder” website by the National Institute of Mental Health, 2008
• Psychological Treatment of Bipolar Disorder by Johnson and Leahy, 2004
References


