

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

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Children with bipolar parents

Paul Tannenbaum* won't forget the scene. His mother's voice is too loud and shrill for his then small ears. She is arguing with his father over money again. She breaks the kitchen window by throwing a bowl through it. She is uncontrollably angry. He could not be more than eight years old and yet he is a bundle of nerves, suffering from chronic anxiety, although he can't understand those feelings yet. This is not the first time he has witnessed her utter destructiveness. He also knows that her anger will turn to depression, but that intensely happy times come around too. Her unsettling unpredictability and severe mood swings were finally given a name by a psychiatrist: Bipolar Mood Disorder.

"There was some relief when my mother was diagnosed with the illness; a label helped me to explain her behaviour and in turn sort out my own feelings, but the emotional damage was done," said Paul.

An untreated bipolar parent, invariably through a lack in regulating their emotions, significantly affects their children's wellbeing, as can be witnessed by Paul's experience. "My own feelings were closely linked to how my mother was feeling that particular day. I was always living in fear, and my father and I constantly walked on egg shells."

What can possibly be done to protect the child against a bipolar parent? What interventions are available? Dr Capelluto, head of the psychiatric ward at the Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital in Johannesburg, said this depends on the family unit. But – "we often see that the family unit has broken down because the bipolar patient has alienated family members. The family fails to understand the illness and so the child of the bipolar patient is not helped adequately."

But she meets with families and tries to create awareness about bipolar disorder. She explains to them that the children should be put in therapy as they often suffer from attachment issues and emotional distress. "Some anxiety is alleviated if the child's feelings are understood and their self-esteem is developed. Psychotherapy certainly helps children cope better."

What is particularly concerning is that if a parent has the illness, the child is at risk of developing a mental illness. "The child may present symptoms, especially if stress over a parent, coupled with genetic risk, triggers emotional disturbances," said Capelluto.

A study led by psychiatrist Boris Birmaher at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in the US showed that young children whose parents have bipolar disorder have a six-fold high risk of developing a mental illness. "The single largest risk factor for the development of bipolar disorder is a positive family history of the disorder," Birmaher noted.

Paul is now 28 and has been diagnosed with clinical depression in conjunction with generalised anxiety disorder. This he blames his mother for, resenting her for her years of illness and emotional abuse.

But Capelluto says that although a child may experience emotional distress due to their parent's illness, bipolar disorder may never happen in the child. She explained that every child is different and there are a number of variables that would lead to the manifestation of bipolar disorder: temperament, attachment issues, the degree of unity in the family, and how much the parent's illness is controlled.

Nevertheless seeing a psychologist could greatly heal the emotional scars even if the illness has not surfaced. Paul believes that he should have sought help at a much younger age, and wishes his mother or another member of his family sent him to therapy.

Within South Africa the first step may be to contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) who have a wide range of brochures, referrals and support groups around the country. They can be contacted on 0800 70 80 90 and www.sadag.co.za.

"A bipolar patient often has limited awareness of the illness and therefore may not understand the full impact on their child, but if awareness is created, there are very effective ways to reduce the effects of the illness on the child," says Capelluto.

According to Jisel Perilla, author of "How to help kids understand bipolar" says "Perhaps most importantly, parents should be treated for their illness to diminish the severity of their children's emotional problems."

"If the parent feels that he is suffering from symptoms of Depression or bipolar disorder, they need to seek help as soon as possible. Parents with bipolar disorder should talk to their families about helping them and their children as they seek treatment," she says.

She suggests that the parent tell his/her child that bipolar disorder is not the child's fault. When something goes wrong in a child's home, the child has a tendency to believe he caused the problem. He should never feel like he did anything wrong to deserve the behaviour.

"Private therapy sessions can help the child cope with concerns, feelings and questions they are too scared to ask a family member. Children who have had to deal with a particularly disruptive, or violent family environment in particular will find private therapy particularly helpful."

A family therapist can also be beneficial as the entire family can be brought together and given advice as to how to deal with the bipolar parent's mood swings. "Family therapy can give the struggling child and family a sense of unity and closeness as well, and help the child realise that they are not alone," says Perilla.

**For further information contact Sadag on
011 262 6396 Cassey Amooore**

IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567

Depression Helpline: 011 262 6396

Bipolar Helpline: 0800 70 80 90

Substance Abuse Helpline: 0800 12 13 14

Suicide sms line: 31393

Substance abuse line: 32312

Website: www.sadag.co.za