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The Challenges of Bipolar for Caregivers

By Dr. Li Faustino

Bipolar Illness has a way of affecting more than just the people who have it. Almost as devastating as having the illness itself, is watching someone you care about go through it and trying to figure out how to help them. For every person reading this, every experience will be different. There are caregivers who do not understand the illness and thus do not know how to care for someone who has it. There are also people *with* the illness who do not understand it and the caregivers must convince them to get treatment. Whatever the situation, relationships are often changed forever by the illness. And caregivers may carry as many problems as the people with the illness—they lose work hours or lose their jobs, they often do not care for themselves and do not tend to their own medical problems, they drop their own self-care routines, they often become sick, they feel devastated by the illness and they often develop depression and anxiety. One of the most popular groups at MDSG is the Friends and Family group. In this group, people discuss problems related to caring for their loved one with the ill-

ness. They often get advice on access to treatment, assessing what is good treatment, how to get their loved one to treatment and so on. Often they also learn that it is just as important to take care of themselves.

Caregivers may carry as many problems as the people with the illness.

Beyond all that, though, are complicated considerations for people who care for people with bipolar or depression. Some of these thoughts are very intense and difficult to think about. Know that if you or anyone you know, has had one or more of these thoughts, you are not alone.

1-Do I still love this person? Sometimes it is difficult to love a person who has the illness even if they are your child, your spouse, your sibling or parent. This is not uncommon. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging this. In fact, wouldn't it be natural to feel things like exasperation, hatred, impatience, and sadness when someone you love is not themselves and being irritable, angry, insulting or grandiose toward you? Having negative feelings

about someone you love does not necessarily mean you do not love them anymore. It may still be important to review the relationship due to the occurrence of the illness, but negative feelings in and of itself, does not define loss of love. We often will, and should, feel negative feelings and still love someone.

2-Was this my fault? This is a very common thought for parents, but siblings, friends and partners may think this, too. The answer is never clear. It is important to understand that fault and blame are rarely valuable ideas. Life is full of stresses, sometimes thought of as "triggers," and people react in myriad ways. Some people endure large amounts of stress and trauma in their lives and never develop an illness like bipolar or depression. Some people become ill and appear to have lived full, happy lives before that. A definitive cause of the illness is not known so when cause is not clear, fault also, cannot be clear.

3-Was I a bad parent? On the topic of fault, parents, in particular, often wonder if their parenting may have

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something to do with the development of bipolar or depression in their child. The reason parents worry is parenting has *plenty* to do with how people turn out. It is difficult to know how your parenting has affected your child. It is best to take the judgment out of your parenting (unless you are abusive) and know that in all honesty, you have had both positive and negative effects on your child. That's life as parent. It is always important to repeatedly review how we parent and change things as the needs arise. Bad parenting, alone, does not cause bipolar illness or depression, and neither do genes, alone. And good parenting does not guard against bipolar. The best suggestion, just in case, is to periodically review your parenting approach and how things are handled. Not doing this may cause extra stress on your child and family. All parents should be doing this anyway.

4-Will my loved one ever get their life back? Since every person's situation and illness is different, it is impossible to answer this question definitively in an article. However, the illness usually changes people forever. It is important for caregivers to change their expectations for their loved one/s with the illness. For example, some people may never fulfill the career they thought they would have before

they got sick. Other people will have that career and some may be successful in an entirely different area. Caregivers' expectations should not be set in stone. This will help both caregivers and the person with the illness reach their best potential. You can change your expectations over and over again. So if someone becomes very sick and perhaps hospitalized, it is probably unrealistic to expect them to return to school or work full time. Just making it out of bed each day is the best expectation, at first. As they get better, your expectations and goals for them may change—they may graduate, they may live independently and have a career. So will they get their life back? We should hope so, but it may not be the same life we thought before the illness came. And it could be a better one.

These are only some of the complicated challenges related to caring for someone with bipolar illness. Caregiver issues are often not addressed, but caring for yourself is the best way to be a happier, healthier and more effective person for your loved one with the illness. Getting to a Family and Friends support group and going to your own psychotherapy are good places to start to learn how to keep up with your own self-care.

Dr. Faustino is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Chair of the MDSG Board.

Ask the Doctor

Send your questions about depression and bi-polar illness to newsletter@mdsg.org Questions will be answered by a psychiatrist or psychologist as appropriate and as space permits.

Mood Disorders Support Group
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