

# GETTING STARTED:

A Guide for Parents of Children  
with Mood Disorders



Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

We've been there.  
We can help.

# Children with Mood Disorders



Learning that your child has a mood disorder, like depression or bipolar disorder, can be frightening and disorienting. You are suddenly plunged into a new world of confusing medical terms, treatment options, and clinician choices, while facing decisions about appropriate education for your child and how to best manage the needs of your family. You may feel isolated and unsure of just what to do. Take a deep breath and remember, you are not alone. DBSA is here to help.

Wellness for your child is possible. This brochure was created to help you take your first steps toward getting started on your family's journey to wellness. There is information on:

- Getting support for yourself
- Expanding your knowledge of depression or bipolar disorder
- Building the proper treatment team
- Understanding potential aspects of a treatment plan
- Talking to your child about mood disorders
- Recognizing that the whole family is affected by mood disorders
- Planning for safety and crises

# Peer Support

Having a support system in place is an important step in ensuring that you can go the distance in supporting and advocating for your child. Connecting with other parents who have had similar experiences and who can offer comfort and encouragement will give you strength and hope. Peer support is an incredible resource when no one else seems to understand, when blame seems to be coming from all sides, or when you need information and ideas from other parents.

DBSA's online support community, the Balanced Mind Parent Network (BMPN), was created for people just like you. It's an online, family-focused community for parents of children with mood disorders with 24/7 access to information and support. You can turn to BMPN for information about your child's behavior and needs, as well as reliable information about mood disorders, treatment, school accommodations, scientific research, and more. Sign up now at [Community.DBSAlliance.org](https://Community.DBSAlliance.org)

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“I don't think I could have survived the past few years without the moral and emotional support of my online friends. I have met people who have experienced what I am experiencing, and not only do they support me, but I can step outside of my own problems by trying to help them.”

-BMPN Participant

If you prefer face-to-face support, many of DBSA's chapters offer in-person support groups for families and friends. You can search for a DBSA support group in your area through [DBSAlliance.org/FindSupport](https://DBSAlliance.org/FindSupport). Groups meet anywhere from once a week to once a month at a scheduled time and location.

# Pediatric Depression

Children and teens can develop depression, just like adults. Childhood depression is a sad or irritable mood that lasts at least several days and causes problems in a child or teen's normal activities, such as school, social activities, and relationships with family and peers.

Symptoms of depression in children and teens include:

- Frequent sadness, crying, or constant irritability
- Loss of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Lack of energy, difficulty concentrating or making choices
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or guilt
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- A marked increase or decrease in weight or appetite
- Complaints of stomachaches and/or headaches when no physical cause can be found
- Frequent absences from school or a drop in school performance
- Sleeping too little at night or too much during the day
- Thoughts of death or suicide and/or self-destructive behavior

If you are concerned that your child is unusually sad, talk with your child about feelings and things that may be bothering him or her at school, at home, or with peers. Take steps to reduce stress. Ask your child if he or she is thinking of self-harm or suicide. Contact your child's teacher to ask if your child has shown unusual or worrisome behaviors at school.

# Pediatric Bipolar Disorder

Pediatric bipolar disorder is a mental health condition marked by periods of extreme and impairing changes in mood, energy, thinking, and behavior. Symptoms may emerge gradually or suddenly. Bipolar disorder does not affect every child in the same way. The frequency, intensity, and duration of a child's symptoms and the child's response to treatment may vary dramatically. There are four types of bipolar disorder:

**Bipolar I.** In this form of the disorder, the individual experiences one or more episodes of mania. Depressive episodes may occur as well. Symptoms of **mania** include:

- Euphoria (elevated mood)
- Grandiosity
- Flight of ideas or racing thoughts
- Talking more than usual or pressure to keep talking
- Irritability or hostility
- Excessive distractibility
- Decreased need for sleep without fatigue
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable but risky activities
- Poor judgment
- Hallucinations and psychosis

**Bipolar II.** Here, the individual experiences recurrent periods of depression with episodes of normal mood or hypomania. Hypomania is a markedly elevated or irritable mood accompanied by increased physical and mental energy, but is typically not as severe as mania in Bipolar I.

**Bipolar Disorder NOS (Not Otherwise Specified).**

Doctors may make this diagnosis when there is severe mood dysregulation with serious impairment, but it is not clear which type of bipolar disorder, if any, is emerging.

**Cyclothymia.** This form of the disorder produces recurrent periods of less severe, but definite, mood swings that may seriously impair the individual's daily life.



## Your Child's Treatment Team

Finding a good treatment team is an important step in effectively treating childhood depression or bipolar disorder. Talk to your child's pediatrician or family practice physician, local therapists, clergy, and other parents to learn which health care provider in your community best fits your needs.

When you meet with a potential provider, ask about diagnosis and treatment options. Mental health treatments must be tailored to the individual. Mood disorders can be tricky to diagnose, especially for children and teens. Don't hesitate to seek a second opinion. Some parents interview clinical team members over the phone to see if their philosophies align.

Additional resources can be found online at [DBSAlliance.org/BMPN](https://DBSAlliance.org/BMPN).

# Treatment

Although there is no cure for mood disorders, there is hope. Individuals living with a mood disorder can and do lead productive and thriving lives. In most cases, treatment can stabilize mood and allow for management and control of symptoms. A good treatment plan is individualized to the person and may include:

- Medication
- Close monitoring of symptoms
- Education about the mental health condition
- Counseling or psychotherapy for the individual
- Counseling or psychotherapy for the family
- Stress reduction
- Good nutrition
- Regular sleep and exercise
- Participation in a support network

Trust your instincts. If you think your child is experiencing a mood disorder, schedule an appointment with your child's physician as soon as possible. The physician may do a physical exam, including lab tests to determine blood count and thyroid function, which can affect mood and energy. A physician also will ask your child or teen about his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

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“This is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't expect quick solutions and easy answers. And even if you do find a solution, consider it a temporary reprieve. For, as your child grows and goes through puberty, chances are very high that today's solution will cease to work and you will need to seek out new solutions for a growing, maturing child.”

—BMPN Participant

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“Trust your instincts. We know our kids better than anyone on this planet, and no one can duplicate that knowledge and experience.”

– BMPN Participant

## Talking to Your Child

It's important to talk with your child about his or her mood disorder. Your child may feel frightened, confused, angry, or ashamed. It's important to remember that mood disorders are not shameful or bad. Your child may have encountered stigma or false information from peers or online. Educate yourself about depression or bipolar disorder so that you can offer accurate and reassuring information and guidance for your child. This may also encourage your child to bring up concerns in the future.

The best way to talk about depression or bipolar disorder depends on your child's age and developmental level. Don't provide more information than your child wants to hear or can handle. Younger children need less information because they have a more limited ability to understand. School-age children may want more details. Teens typically are ready for more information. Address their questions directly and honestly, and offer support and guidance. Create an open and ongoing conversation, so that your child feels able to ask the tough questions he or she may be struggling with.

Parents can also explain that it's normal to sometimes feel sad, angry, anxious, or irritable, but when these feelings are very intense, last for a long time, or interfere with school, friendships, and family relationships, it could be a sign that help is needed. Whatever the child's age and level of maturity, make sure that the conversation takes place when the child or teen feels safe and comfortable.

# How Mood Disorders Affect Family

Caring for a child with a mood disorder can have a large impact on the family, including negative effects on siblings or your partnership or marriage. It is important to recognize this and take the time to work through family relationship issues.

Parents or partners may feel guilty, angry, or burned out. They may miss work because of crises at home. Siblings may experience trauma, and the whole family may live in an atmosphere of extended crisis. Often, the family becomes isolated. In an exhausting and emotionally overwhelming environment, it is easy to lose track of what “normal” means.

## **Tips to nurture siblings:**

- Identify individuals to care for siblings in a crisis
- Let siblings know it is ok to feel angry, jealous, or sad
- Be available to talk with siblings and to answer questions honestly and in developmentally appropriate ways
- Encourage therapy as a way to gain coping skills and express feelings
- Set aside one-on-one time with siblings to share an activity they enjoy
- Seek other supports, including sibling support groups

## **Tips to sustain marriages or partnerships:**

- Make a conscious decision and effort to nurture your partnership; support each other and express appreciation and respect
- Consider marriage counseling as part of the process of nurturing your relationship
- Engage in “solution thinking;” instead of focusing on what’s wrong, work toward what you want to have happen
- Seek balance in your life, so that your child’s issues don’t dominate all the time
- Take turns; if one parent or partner is burned out, the other can step in to offer a break

# Crisis Planning

## Crisis Planning

Children and teens with mood disorders can become very angry, sad, or even suicidal. A crisis situation exists when your child is a danger to themselves or others or when there is a need for immediate action or intervention. It is vital to plan for an emergency before a crisis occurs. Make sure a list of emergency phone numbers is readily accessible in case of a crisis.

## Psychiatric Hospitalization

When considering psychiatric hospitalization, safety is the primary concern. If your child is at risk of harming themselves or others, hospitalization is often the safest route. Outside of emergencies, hospitalization may be helpful if mood symptoms are getting worse despite appropriate outpatient treatment.

## Police Intervention

Safety is critical. Call 911 if a situation is out of control and you fear that your child, you, or someone else could be hurt. If you call 911, tell the police dispatcher that your child has bipolar disorder or depression, or if you fear your child could be suicidal. Ask the dispatcher to send a social worker or a police officer with Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), if possible.

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“Raising a child living with a mental health condition can be challenging, but watching that child grow into a healthy, self-sufficient adult brings a unique set of rewards. The need for open and honest communication established during childhood lays the foundation for a parent/child intimacy that can endure through adulthood.”

- DBSA Family and Friends Support Group Facilitator

While childhood mood disorders can be very difficult for everyone in the family, it is important to remember that there is treatment and support available. DBSA encourages you to visit the many resources we have available that may be of help to your family.



## Resources

DBSA has a wide array of resources that may be helpful to you and your family.

- **The Balanced Mind Parent Network:** These online family oriented resources include educational information, a library, listing of resources, bookstore, and an expanded version of this Getting Started Guide.  
[DBSAAlliance.org/BMPN](https://DBSAAlliance.org/BMPN)
- **The Balanced Mind Parent Network Online Communities:** Join other parents of children living with mood disorders in our online support communities that are accessible 24/7.  
[Community.DBSAAlliance.org](https://Community.DBSAAlliance.org)
- **DBSA Support Groups:** Experience face-to-face support with individuals who have a shared experience.  
[DBSAAlliance.org/FindSupport](https://DBSAAlliance.org/FindSupport)
- **The DBSA Facing Us Clubhouse:** This is home to a wealth of customizable and personal wellness tools including the DBSA Wellness Tracker, a user-friendly online tool that allows you to keep track of your (or your child's) emotional, mental, and physical health.  
[FacingUs.org](https://FacingUs.org)

DBSA does not endorse or recommend the use of any specific treatment, medication, or resource mentioned in this brochure. For advice about specific treatments or medications, individuals should consult their physicians and/or mental health professionals.

This brochure is not intended to take the place of a visit to a qualified health care provider.



We've been there.  
We can help.

Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

**The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)** is the leading peer-directed national organization focusing on the two most prevalent mental health conditions, depression and bipolar disorder, which affect more than 21 million Americans, account for 90% of the nation's suicides every year, and cost \$23 billion in lost workdays and other workplace losses.

DBSA's peer-based, wellness-oriented, and empowering services and resources are available when people need them, where they need them, and how they need to receive them—online 24/7, in local support groups, in audio and video casts, or in printed materials distributed by DBSA, our chapters, and mental health care facilities across America.

Through our extensive online and print resources and our more than 700 support groups and nearly 300 chapters, DBSA reaches millions of people each year with in-person and online peer support; current, readily understandable information about depression and bipolar disorder; and empowering tools focused on an integrated approach to wellness.

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We hope you found the information in this brochure helpful. If you would like to support DBSA's mission, please consider making a donation by calling (800) 826-3632 or by visiting **[DBSAAlliance.org/Donate](http://DBSAAlliance.org/Donate)**.

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