

## INTRODUCTION

# Helping Your Bipolar Child

## A FRESH OUTLOOK

If you have a child with bipolar disorder, every day may feel a little like riding a wild horse. You don't know where the day will take you or how you and your child will emerge from the experience. And just when you think you've gotten the situation in hand, it kicks up its heels and blindsides you. You may not know what else you can do to control the mood swings, and you worry about the future of your bipolar child and your family.

This book is about taming bipolar disorder so that your child and your family can lead the lives you were meant to have. It's about learning a new set of principles and adopting a toolbox full of strategies that will give you a fresh approach to getting through the day when you feel like the only thing you can expect is the unexpected. It's about helping your child *and* your family (and, yes, even yourself). Most of all it's about hope, and knowing, as one mother put it so eloquently, that "staying hopeful is all about remembering that your child is really that sweet innocent blessing of a being that you would give your very life for."

I have been working with children who have bipolar disorder and their families for more than 20 years, and, naturally, one of the very first questions parents ask me is "Will my child ever get better?" Invariably, my answer is "There is an excellent chance, but we need to work toward it." Whether you're in the midst of exploring the possibility that your child has bipolar disorder, just received a diagnosis, or are already coping with the diagnosis on a daily basis, a positive, happy, and successful future for

your child may seem like a lot to hope for. But my experience has shown that it's possible when you have the right tools.

The purpose of this book is to offer you those tools. I have assembled this tool kit from my years of work with bipolar children at our Pediatric Mood Disorders Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. There, my colleagues and I explore brain function in children and teens with mood disorders in our neuroscience research laboratory, study treatments that help regulate moods in our treatment development lab, and serve families in a multidisciplinary clinic. Through this combination of treating children, working with their families, and conducting research, we learn more every day about the best possible ways to help children who have bipolar disorder. We've made encouraging strides: 68% of the children and adolescents were stabilized over 18 months following the medication approach we've developed. And, with the help of a very specific type of psychotherapy, we've seen these improvements sustained over the next 3 years. We call this approach a Multi-Modal Integrated Therapy for Youth with Bipolar Disorder (MITY-BD, pronounced Mighty-BD).

## **There's a Rainbow Ahead**

We have a lot more work to do, and our research is ongoing, but we know enough now to help you reap the benefits of a system of care that breaks new ground by integrating psychotherapy involving the child and the rest of the family with medication (MITY-BD). What is commonly referred to as "child- and family-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy" (CFF-CBT) is based in part on a model of family-focused therapy with bipolar adults. I have adapted these strategies to meet the unique needs of children with bipolar disorder and added critical elements from interpersonal therapy, and now research is beginning to confirm what I've been seeing in my practice: that children can benefit in the same ways as adults. It is all about finding the right tools for children with bipolar disorder rather than using unmodified tools merely to make do.

Based on a preliminary study I conducted with a small number of patients, when combined with medication, CFF-CBT was shown to decrease the incidence of mania, depression, aggression, psychosis, sleep disturbances, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and to improve the children's overall functioning. It offers great hope for taming

this wild and unpredictable disorder by offering information, encouragement, and tools you can use to move confidently through different stages and situations toward a more positive future for your child and you. It makes you an informed advocate for your child in the outside world—with the healthcare system, schools, and other community institutions that have an impact on your child’s well-being and success. Ultimately, psychological treatment plus medication for your child can not only improve your child’s quality of life, but also minimize the impact of your child’s illness on *your* health (both mental and physical) and that of the rest of your family.

Any therapist who uses cognitive-behavioral therapy, family therapy, or interpersonal therapy will already be familiar with many aspects of the program in this book. Psychotherapy of various types is widely available for children and teens with bipolar disorder, and the most important criterion in choosing a therapist is always the therapist’s familiarity with treating these kids. With this book, you can learn how to apply the lessons of our form of treatment on your own and share the information in this book with your child’s treatment team.

Because it’s easier for children and families to remember, I have boiled down the components of CFF-CBT to seven strategies represented by the acronym RAINBOW. I have infused this entire book with the concepts that make up the RAINBOW approach, and, more important, throughout the book I provide all the information needed to understand bipolar disorder and its relationship with brain function, manage medication, negotiate school situations, persevere through crises, and look after yourself. I’ll show you how to apply these principles starting with your child’s diagnosis and proceeding through treatment. Chapter 6 in particular breaks down each general strategy into practical tools and techniques you can use to reap the full benefit of your child’s treatment and to get your family through every day as unscathed as possible (for now, the display on page 4 shows you what each letter in RAINBOW stands for). But I hope what you’ll take from this book more than anything is the ability to apply the concepts and principles of the RAINBOW therapy like they are second nature, translating your new outlook into effective ways to roll with the punches of bipolar disorder in all areas of your unique family’s life.

To me, RAINBOW is a neat image for you, your child, and your family to keep in mind, especially when the going gets tough. It symbolizes

the happiness and calm that often comes after the storm and serves as a beacon of hope to families in turmoil caused by bipolar disorder. The image of a rainbow is also in keeping with my philosophy that mood variability (represented by the colors of the rainbow) is appropriate in moderation (green versus “ultraviolet” sad moods or “infrared” rages or manic spells, which are more extreme). In my practice, a major goal is to help families incorporate the RAINBOW system into their daily lives so the bipolar child can reach and then stay in the safe middle zone.

The RAINBOW approach helps bipolar children reach that goal by promoting stability both internally and externally. That is, it’s called *child- and family-focused therapy* because it targets both the child individually (through medication and individual therapy) and the entire family (through psychoeducation and coping techniques). The underlying premise is that children with bipolar disorder need medication to target the biological source of their mood swings and self-management techniques that will serve them well into adulthood, *but they do even better when their family is doing well too*. RAINBOW keeps the whole family working collaboratively, with an emphasis on positivity. You and your family—and the child, too—will help monitor and manage the child’s moods, establish predictable routines and balanced lifestyles, and cultivate supportive friendships for your child and sources of support for you. Your child and the rest of your family will learn to replace negative thinking with positive self-talk and gain experience with the many ways that effective problem solving can keep bipolar disorder from wreaking havoc in your daily lives.

---

With the **RAINBOW approach**, your family and your child’s treatment team help the child stay in the middle of the mood spectrum as much as possible using these strategies (along with medication):

- R:** Routine to encourage a stable schedule
  - A:** Affect (mood) regulation and Anger control
  - I:** “I can do it”—positive self-talk to build self-esteem
  - N:** No Negative thoughts
  - B:** Be a good friend (for your child) and lead a *Balanced* lifestyle (for you)
  - O:** Optimal problem solving
  - W:** Ways to get support—for the child and the rest of your family
-

## Facing the Challenge Together

*“Everything* is a challenge living with a bipolar child,” admits one parent, whether it’s “sticking to a constant schedule, always being proactive to prevent the next meltdown, or never knowing what each moment is going to bring.” This thought has been echoed by virtually every parent of a bipolar child that I’ve met. “No matter how diligent you are at understanding the illness and your child’s triggers or at preplanning and implementing preventative measures,” said one of them, “you have to accept that you will still face the unexpected.”

A major goal of the RAINBOW approach is to keep the unexpected to a minimum while acknowledging the reality that it’s unlikely to be eliminated altogether. That reality is an example of what I’ve learned from the hundreds of families like yours who have helped me understand the needs of bipolar children, their parents, and their siblings. The RAINBOW approach emerged not just from my research and clinical experience, but also directly out of the experiences of the families I served. Without their openness and generosity and their unwavering commitment to creating the best possible life for their children, my understanding would be only two-dimensional.

I hope you’ll view this book as an extension of the collaboration with families that I’ve found so fruitful. You and I face the challenges of childhood bipolar disorder together. In this book, I describe in detail how you can work with your own doctor and other caregivers to make the MITY-BD program an effective part of your family’s treatment and support system. The nuts and bolts of medication management, therapeutic intervention, and behavior management are only a part of the picture. There’s so much more involved. You also need to develop a philosophy and outlook that can get you through the ups and downs, lift you up on the bad days, and help you enjoy the good ones.

That’s why I am providing you with a set of principles for coping with the stresses and challenges so eloquently articulated by parents in my practice and throughout this book. I hope these principles will provide a lifeline, as well as a source of inspiration and hope, for coping when times get tough. These principles will show up throughout this book often and in many different forms, and I have summarized them in Appendix A for easy reference.

Look at them often. Mark the page and leave it on your nightstand. Review them before going to bed, and use them to prepare yourself for

### Principles for Meeting the Challenges of Bipolar Disorder

- **Get educated:** Understanding bipolar disorder is one of the first and most important steps you can take to enhance your ability to cope and thrive. Parents invariably report that gaining knowledge about the disorder helps them stay calm, manage their fears, and deal effectively with problems when they arise. As one put it: “I am able to keep my compassion by reading and rereading every bit of information I can about the illness, and by staying in contact with other parents who have similar issues in their homes. The more I know, the less I fear. The less I fear, the more effective I can be in getting treatment for my son and for us.”
- **Be realistic:** A diagnosis of bipolar disorder inevitably changes your expectations for your child, yourself, and your family life. You may worry about what kind of future your child will have. Rather than despair about your child’s long-term prospects, focus on meeting modest short-term goals like getting through the day without a “meltdown” or having a good outing to the mall. Then celebrate those achievements. Don’t expect miracles of your child or yourself, and remember that good things will still happen—find ways to appreciate them when they do.
- **Everything in moderation:** Sometimes parents drive themselves to distraction trying to do everything possible for their child and get everything “right.” For instance, keeping a detailed mood chart can take so much time and attention that it gets in the way of your relationship with your child, your spouse, or your other children. Don’t let the quest for perfection add to an already stressful situation. You have enough to cope with—do your best with what’s important and let some things slide.
- **Be flexible:** If there’s any truism of bipolar disorder, it is that unpredictability is the norm, rather than the exception. Your plans can change in an instant and when you least expect it. Being flexible and resilient is not just a good idea, it is a matter of survival for families dealing with bipolar disorder. If flexibility isn’t in your nature, it may be a skill you’ll have to cultivate.
- **Have fun and learn to play:** Fun doesn’t have to go out the window just because your child has bipolar disorder. You both need opportunities to play, relax, and participate in the things that make life worth living. It may seem like a stretch, especially if you’ve just started down this path, but believe me, you can have fun and find joy in your life if you can get your head above water long enough to look for opportunities.
- **Keep your sense of humor:** It may not seem like there’s a lot to laugh about, but you can find plenty of humor if you keep things in perspec-

tive. Bipolar kids can be as silly, funny, and clever as other children (sometimes even more so), so enjoy those moments when they amuse, entertain, and delight you. And don't take yourself too seriously. When things go awry despite your best efforts, as they frequently do, recognize the absurdity of it all and remember to take life with a grain of salt. Identify supportive people who can offer strength and stimulate laughter and nurture those friendships.

- **Stay compassionate:** It is a continuing challenge to remain compassionate and loving when your child is at her worst and you're at your wits' end. But your child didn't ask for this disorder nor did she bring it on herself. Try to remember that, as difficult and frustrating as it can be for you, it's even harder for your child. As one parent put it, "What helps me to stay compassionate is insight that I've gained through support groups as to what my son is going through within his mind on a moment-to-moment basis. I can't even imagine how traumatic and difficult it must be to live within himself, hating himself, believing he is stupid and unlovable."
- **Make connections:** You don't have to struggle alone. In fact, isolation is likely to intensify your stress and unhappiness. Build a support network for both your child and yourself. If you find it difficult to identify people you feel comfortable sharing your problems with in your own community, you can connect with thousands of parents facing similar issues online through the Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation (CABF) ([www.bpkids.org](http://www.bpkids.org)), National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) ([www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)), and similar groups.

whatever tomorrow will bring. Take a few minutes to go over the list to prepare for meetings with doctors, teachers, or other authority figures. Post them on the refrigerator as a reminder for the whole family. Most of all, take them to heart! With these attitudes, you can make such a big difference for your child and the rest of your family.

## You Are Your Child's Best Hope

*"The thing that helps us stay hopeful is knowing that we have great support (therapist, psychiatrist, school personnel) and that we, as parents, are doing everything we possibly can to help our child."*

All parents feel inadequate some of the time, and, given what you are dealing with, you are likely to feel that way more often than most. But if you try your best and keep your expectations modest, patient and consistent parental effort will slowly but surely pay off. When things fall apart, as they occasionally do, remember that you didn't choose this problem, and you have no choice but to keep plugging away. All that you can do is to be the best parent you can be in a difficult situation. So cut yourself some slack, don't work too hard, and don't be too hard on yourself.

The important thing is that you keep your eyes on the horizon. Don't be too discouraged by any setback, whether it lasts a day, a month, or a year. Your child's ultimate outcomes are built slowly over time, and setbacks, regardless of how bad they may be, are almost always temporary. There is always a sunrise after the sunset. What will make a bigger difference than any miracle will be your optimism and the hope that you hold in your heart and convey to your child so that she too can feel it, believe it, and ultimately realize it.

## How to Use This Book

You can use this book whether your child has already been diagnosed with bipolar disorder or you're heading in that direction. Some of the strategies, much of the information about bipolar disorder, and all of the principles you'll read about will carry you through to your child's adulthood, but in this book my focus is on children.

The book is divided into three sections, with the chapters moving from the general to the more specific. In Part I, I'll start with an essential foundation of facts and figures that will give you an understanding of the disorder you're dealing with. Part II lays out all the components of the treatment that works and how you can get the best for your child. Part III offers a raft of practical solutions for the daily challenges faced in each domain in which your child spends his days.

You may already know a great deal about bipolar disorder, but I urge you to read Part I anyway, as educating yourself and the other people in your child's life about childhood bipolar disorder is critical to successful treatment and long-term management of the illness. The next few chapters recap some of the latest scientific research, including studies that I've conducted or participated in, and my two decades of clinical experience.

It, and the rest of the book, is also imbued with the wisdom of many parents like you. You'll read about their problems, their hopes, and their creative solutions thanks to the generosity of 200 members of CABF and many other parents from my practice. They, too, are in this with you and me. Together, we'll keep reaching for that rainbow—those beautiful colors arising after the storm!