

Abstract

This study seeks to explore the challenges and difficulties faced by children raised by a parent with bipolar disorder, with a specific focus on the experiences and memories of daughters of these individuals. Bipolar disorder, previously known as manic-depressive illness, is characteristically referred to as an episodic, yet lifelong and clinically severe affective (mood) disorder. Bipolar disorder is a severe mental illness, which is stressful not only for patients, but also for family members. Very little work has been done to define more precisely the family burden associated with the illness. Studies that do focus on the impact of bipolar disorder on caregivers or families of the patient have looked at the family as a whole. There seems to be a scarcity of research looking at the experiences of children of parents with bipolar disorder. The children of individuals with bipolar disorder are at high risk for developing a range of mental disorders. Overall, parents with bipolar disorder tend to create a familial environment that is unstable and lacking in structure. Therefore in addition to being at genetic risk for the development of mental disorders, are exposed to a stressful familial environment that increases the risk of psychopathology and difficulties. Despite the importance of assessing the impact parental bipolar disorder can have on children, there is a lack of relevant literature. A non-probability sample of eight female individuals raised by a parent with bipolar disorder was selected from the student population at Wits University. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to gain in depth information regarding the memories and experiences of these individuals. One interview was conducted per participant. Once the data was collected, thematic content analysis was used in order to analyse and draw conclusions from the data. From this method of analysis ten main themes were found, as well as six sub themes.

The findings of this study suggest that bipolar disorder has a profound effect, not only on the individual suffering from the illness, but on their children as well. Manic episodes appear to be a particularly stressful time, featuring with great prominence in the memories of respondents. Participants felt strongly that their family environment was affected by their parent's illness. In general it seemed as if participants with ill mothers described a far more chaotic family environment as compared to those participants with ill fathers. This study also found that knowledge and understanding help these individuals make sense of their parent's illness, seemingly providing a sense of power and control. A number of participants mentioned the negative effects that stigma associated with mental illness has on the families concerned, often leading to adverse outcomes. In contrast to this, support and understanding by both healthcare professionals as well as the broader community is considered indispensable. The children of patients with bipolar disorder, in addition to being at genetic risk for the development of mental disorders, are exposed to a stressful environment that increases the risk of psychopathology and other difficulties. It is therefore imperative that further research be conducted in this area, as relatively little is known about the long term effects of the parent's illness on their child.