



Conversation Guide for Young Adults

A GUIDE THROUGH
THE BIPOLAR BRAIN

Preparing families, fellow educators/professionals and administrators for discussing mental health issues

Assure that all necessary building, district, or agency protocol has been followed with regard to the showing of the film. If required, verify that information was sent home with or to the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the child. If possible, include a school psychologist, counselor, nurse, or social worker in the planning and at the film's showing.

Preparing young adults

Prepare young adults in advance for the film and discussion; provide the context and a description of the film, and include the rationale for viewing it and discussing it as a group.

Remind participants to:

- use respectful language — terms like crazy, mental, psycho, retard, and so on, are not acceptable.
- respect other students' and individuals' privacy. That means respecting the confidentiality of people's personal stories by not discussing them outside the classroom or without their permission.
- remember that the film showcases individuals representing their own perspectives and experiences, and that everyone has a very different experience.
- think about their questions carefully. Tell students that during discussion, questions will be addressed but should be phrased thoughtfully. Encourage them not to reveal personal information in a public setting if they are not comfortable.
- remember that adults (including you) will be available after the film and discussion to answer questions and discuss any of their concerns in a more private setting.
- be prepared for the emotional nature of some of what they may hear. Some discussions may evoke discomfort for some students, and may lead them to question their own functioning. Students need to know this is a natural reaction to the discussion.



- avoid equating mental health disorders with criminality, incompetence, or lack of ability.
- maintain and expect respectful listening, privacy and confidentiality.

After the presentation, consider the discussion prompts and materials as appropriate for the audience. Additionally, make sure to distribute the resource list of local mental health services and supports to participants and to follow up with individuals who express concern, and consider sending those resources home.

Discussion Questions - Young Adult

Young adults are generally capable of handling much more information and asking more specific and difficult questions. Adolescents often talk more openly with their friends and peers than with their adults. As a result, some teens may have already have misinformation about mental illnesses. Adolescents respond more positively to an open dialogue that includes give and take. They are not as open or responsive if a conversation feels one-sided or like a lecture.

1. One of the challenges is the shame, embarrassment, and disgrace faced by individuals living with mental illness. After watching *Ride the Tiger* and seeing the stories of individuals living with bipolar disorder, what are some of the challenges faced by individuals living with mental illness?
2. The film discusses the functions of the brain, and the complex causes of mental illnesses including bipolar disorder; the functioning of the brain is critical to health. What are some of the ways in which science and technology are used to learn more about bipolar disorder and improve the lives of individuals with the disorder? (e.g. school, work, family interactions, finances)
3. The film presents the stories of individuals living with bipolar disorder and highlights how mental health issues impact the quality of our lives – whether we are able to have healthy relationships, take care of ourselves, and be productive in school, work and leisure. Often we think only about medication in treating all forms of illness. What are some of the things you noticed that the individuals in the film did in order to stay healthy and support mental health?
4. Many individuals in the film had challenges in getting help in living with bipolar disorder. What are the factors that make diagnosing mental illness and health issues difficult? What is the impact of an individual being diagnosed incorrectly or in the delay of a correct diagnosis and treatment?



5. When watching the film, how did those individuals featured describe the support they received from friends, family members, and others in their lives? How might you support a friend or family member facing similar challenges?

6. Staying well means taking care of your mental health as well as your physical health. What are some of the challenges and obstacles you might face to taking care of your mental health? (e.g. stress, time, demands of school, work and family) How might you overcome those challenges in order to care for your mental health? (e.g. physical exercise, meditation, hobbies)

Mental Health – Becoming informed

What does it mean to be depressed?

Everyone has good days and bad days, ups and downs. School, work, parents, friendships, family, and relationships can be comforting but also confusing and frustrating at times. Things can be great one minute, awful the next, – everyone feels overwhelmed sometimes. Everyday sadness can be caused by a loss or a major life change, such as the death of someone you care about, a break-up of a relationship, moving to a new neighborhood or school, or the divorce of your parents. Such reactions are normal! But if this unhappiness lasts for more than two weeks and starts to interfere with your life, schoolwork, work, relationships, physical health or participation in normal activities (e.g. exercise, spending time with friends, hobbies, personal care) it might be something more serious. Some other feelings and behavior that are important to notice include:

- sadness that will not go away
- anger or irritability
- changes in your appetite— eating more or eating less
- hard time sleeping or sleeping too much
- less energy; feeling exhausted or burned-out
- hard time making decisions
- guilt, feelings of worthlessness
- headache, upset stomach or other physical pain that does not seem to have a physical cause
- not able to enjoy things you once liked
- using alcohol or drugs
- thinking about hurting yourself or someone else

- thinking about dying or killing yourself.

If I have been depressed, down, or feeling any of these symptoms does that mean I have depression or bipolar disorder?

When people talk about feeling “depressed,” they might mean they are having a bad day, or they might be talking about clinical depression. The difference between having a bad day and clinical depression is:

- **how intense the mood is;** depression is more intense than a bad mood.
- **how long it lasts;** a bad mood is usually gone in a few days, but clinical depression lasts two weeks or longer.
- **how much it interferes with your life;** a bad mood does not keep you from going to school or spending time with friends. Depression can keep you from doing these things, and may even make it difficult to get out of bed, eat, or take care of yourself.

What should I do if I think that a friend or family member might have depression or is diagnosed as living with bipolar disorder?

It is important to remember that everyone displays a range of moods and there are times that everyone gets down or depressed. We cannot make diagnoses, – but we can encourage our friend or family member to tell someone trustworthy about what he or she is experiencing and to see a doctor as soon as possible. If you do not have a doctor, contact your school guidance counselor, school nurse, or another trusted adult to connect with a health provider.

- Express your concern and support.
- Remind your friend or family member that help is available and that mental health is a part of overall health.
- Ask questions, listen to ideas, and be responsive when the topic of mental health problems come up.
- Reassure your friend or family member that you care about him or her.
- Contact an adult if you think something may be going on that is dangerous or harmful, or if someone is hurting him or herself or others.

How do you start talking about mental health or mental health issues? I don't want to interfere...

Do you need help starting a conversation about mental health? Try leading with these questions and make sure to listen actively to your friend or family member's response. To listen actively means that you pay attention to the person speaking, ask questions that help you to understand, and avoid making statements that suggest you are judging the person speaking.

- I've been worried about you. Do you have someone to talk to?
- What else can I help you with?
- I am someone who cares and wants to listen. What do you want me to know about how you are feeling?
- Keep reminding the person that you are there to offer support. It can be helpful to say things like:
 - "I'm here for you and I care."
 - "I may not understand, but I am here to listen or find someone who can."
 - "You are an important person and you mean a lot to me."

What if I think I might have a mental health issue or illness?

If you have, or believe you may have, mental health concerns it can be helpful to talk about these issues with others. It can be scary to reach out for help, but it is often the first step to helping you heal, grow, and recover.

Build Your Support System: Find an adult you can confide in - a parent, family member, teacher, faith leader, health care provider or other trusted individual who gives good advice when you want and ask for it, and can assist you in taking action that will help.

Get an Accurate Diagnosis and Treatment Plan: Just as in all aspects of personal health, getting an accurate diagnosis is the first step in treatment of mental health disorders including bipolar disorder treatment. Making the diagnosis of bipolar disorder can be tricky even for trained professionals, so it is best to see a psychiatrist with experience treating bipolar disorder rather than a family doctor or another type of physician. Your family doctor can give you a referral to a psychiatrist.



Diagnosis: A diagnostic exam for bipolar disorder generally consists of the following:

- **Psychological evaluation** – The doctor will conduct a complete psychiatric history. You will answer questions about your symptoms, the impact on your daily life, any treatment you have previously received, your physical health, medication and/or drug use, and family history
- **Medical history and physical** – There are no lab tests for identifying bipolar disorder, but a doctor should conduct a medical history and physical exam in order to rule out other illnesses or medications that might be causing your symptoms.

In addition to taking your psychiatric and medical history, your doctor may talk to family members and friends about your moods and behaviors. Often, those close to you can give a more accurate and objective description of your symptoms.

Treatment: A comprehensive treatment plan for bipolar disorder aims to relieve symptoms, restore your ability to function better, improve problems the illness has caused at home, at work, in relationships, and reduce the likelihood of recurrence. A complete treatment plan involves:

- **Medication** – Medication is the cornerstone of bipolar disorder treatment. Taking a mood stabilizing medication can help minimize the highs and lows of bipolar disorder, keep symptoms under control, and make you feel more consistent emotionally.
- **Psychotherapy** – Therapy is essential for dealing with bipolar disorder and the problems it has caused in your life. Working with a therapist can help cope with difficult or uncomfortable feelings, repair your relationships, manage stress, and regulate your mood.
- **Education** – Managing symptoms and preventing complications begins with a thorough knowledge of your illness and understanding of how your body responds to the illness.
- **Lifestyle management** – By carefully regulating your lifestyle, you can keep symptoms and mood episodes to a minimum. This involves maintaining a regular sleep schedule, avoiding alcohol and drugs, eating well, following a consistent exercise program, minimizing stress, and taking medication as prescribed. Also, it is important to realize and regularly access the things, people, and activities that bring you enjoyment, comfort, and peace. Seek those out!
- **Support** – Participating in a bipolar disorder support group gives you the opportunity to share your experiences and learn from others who know what you're going through. The support of friends and family is invaluable. Reaching out to people who love you does not mean that you are a burden to others.

If someone confides in you regarding a mental health issue, what might you say or do?

Let the person know you care and that there is no need to feel ashamed or guilty. Avoid telling him or her things like, “Snap out of it.” Instead highlight that behaviors and feelings can be a part of a mental illness and can be treated.

- Include the individual in activities realizing that he or she might not want to participate at first. If the answer is no, ask again later, or offer to stay in and spend time together.

If you are worried the person might be suicidal, ask and help them find help. A straightforward, caring question about suicide will not cause an individual to start having suicidal thoughts. If he or she is thinking of suicide, do not promise secrecy. Tell an adult you trust immediately and provide that person with the following information: Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK, visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org, or text “GO” to 741-741.

What if I am thinking about hurting myself or someone else? What if someone I know talks about suicide?

Tell an adult you trust right away. Help is available.

The feelings that cause a person to think about suicide are caused by the person’s illness. Suicide is a *permanent* solution to a temporary problem. Feeling suicidal is not a character defect, and it does not mean that you are crazy, weak, or flawed. It only means that you have more pain than you can cope with right now. This pain seems overwhelming and permanent at the moment. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth and young adults aged 15-24 and 90% of those who die by suicide had an underlying mental illness. Talking to a friend or family member about suicidal thoughts and feelings can be extremely difficult for anyone.

Some things you can do if you or someone you know is thinking about suicide:

- Listen. Let the suicidal person unload despair, vent anger. No matter how negative the conversation seems, the fact that it exists is a positive sign.
- Be sympathetic, non-judgmental, patient, calm, and accepting. Your friend or family member is doing the right thing by talking about his/her feelings.



- Offer hope. Reassure the person that help is available and that the suicidal feelings are temporary. Let the person know that his or her life is important to you.
- Do not promise confidentiality or argue. Avoid saying things like "You have so much to live for," or "Your suicide will hurt your family."

If you are thinking about suicide:

- call for help or talk to an adult you trust and explain how bad things are. Do not keep feelings to yourself.
- avoid using alcohol and/or drugs.
- consider making temporary changes to keep yourself safe while getting help. Leaving a location with weapons, drugs, alcohol, or other characteristics that could contribute to harming yourself may be a first step as you reach out to others for support.

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