

# Making Sense out of the Tragic Death of Rebecca Riley: How to Help Children and Families Living with Bipolar Disorder

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When a child with bipolar disorder takes his life or the grossly unthinkable happens and those in charge of caring for the child cause a tragedy, people pause to mourn a senseless death. They also wonder helplessly if there was anything they could have done to help. As we pause in our great sadness to mourn the loss of the precious life of Rebecca Riley, please take a moment to learn how you can reach out and help other children and families with bipolar disorder.

It is estimated that there are nearly a million young people in the U.S. suffering with bipolar disorder. The condition is highly heritable increasing the likelihood that more than one member of the family will suffer from the illness. Parents of children with this condition are put in some of the most intense parenting circumstances with some of the least support. It is more likely that a family dealing with bipolar disorder will be ostracized than welcomed, more likely that they will be condemned than supported, more likely that they will be treated with disdain than befriended and more likely that they will face a society who is ignorant of brain disorders than one who understands. Each of us has it in our power to begin changing this. Nearly every person in America knows an individual with bipolar disorder. Is it your neighbor, classmate, student, workmate, or perhaps your relative? Here are some concrete ways for you to help:

- § **Refer families to support.** Families with bipolar disorder need support. They need to connect with other individuals and educate themselves regarding the illness and its treatment, including medication safety. Follow this link: [http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=lrn\\_support](http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=lrn_support) for organizations in your area that make a difference every day.
- § **Contribute to the cause.** Help end the controversy on how to treat and diagnosis pediatric bipolar disorder. There is little funding and support to make testing and research happen. Medication safety, diagnostic accuracy and research into the genetic underpinnings of the illness are high priorities. Without sufficient funding this research crawls slowly forward. Pediatric bipolar disorder is funded at the level of an orphan illness. Put it on your list of charitable giving. Your donation can make a difference: <http://www.jbrf.org/help/index.html> or [http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=don\\_donate](http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=don_donate)
- § **Become interested and educated.** Learn what bipolar disorder is, how it presents in children, how it can affect their ability to develop and learn, and what medical and psychosocial interventions are necessary. It is difficult to help someone else without a knowledge base of your own. Gone are the days when this is someone else's problem. [http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=lrn\\_about](http://www.bpkids.org/site/PageServer?pagename=lrn_about)
- § **Encourage treatment.** Sometimes we inadvertently discourage treatment by negative remarks and statements about medications, doctors and brain disorders. It may be impossible for parents to appropriately address the needs of their children if their own medical needs are not being cared for.
- § **Erase stigma.** Open your heart and mind to embrace families struggling with brain disorders. One caring teacher, friend, or neighbor can mean the world to a family who feels isolated and alone in their daily struggle. Bring a casserole, flowers or write a note to a family living with bipolar disorder. Show them that you understand that brain illnesses are just as devastating as illnesses of the body.

While you will never be able to prevent every tragedy or save every life you may just save one. And if each of you reaches out with empathy and understanding the impact will be profound.