

Mom or dad has bipolar disorder? Keep stress in check

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Children whose mother or father is affected by bipolar disorder may need to keep their stress levels in check. A new international study, led by Concordia University, suggests the stress hormone cortisol is a key player in the mood disorder. The findings published in *Psychological Medicine*, are the first to show that cortisol is elevated more readily in these children in response to the stressors of normal everyday life.

"Previous research has shown that children of parents with bipolar disorder are four times as likely to develop mood disorders as those from parents without the condition," says senior author Mark Ellenbogen, Canada Research Chair in Developmental Psychopathology at Concordia University and a member of the Centre for Research in Human Development. "The goal of our study was to determine how this is happening."

Cortisol, the telltale hormone

Ellenbogen and colleagues had previously shown that cortisol levels in children with a parent affected by bipolar disorder were higher than kids whose parents were unaffected by the condition. The current study measured [cortisol levels](#) in these same individuals during chronic and episodic stress periods. In both circumstances, children of parents with bipolar disorder showed a greater increase in cortisol than those of parents without the disorder.

"Our study demonstrates that affected children are biologically more sensitive to the experience of stress in their natural and normal environment compared to unaffected peers," says Ellenbogen. "This higher reactivity to stress might be one explanation of why these offspring end up developing disorders and is a clear risk factor to becoming ill later on."

"We think we might be beginning to understand where we can intervene to actually prevent this

increased sensitivity from developing," continues Ellenbogen. "We believe this sensitivity develops during childhood and our suspicion is that if you could teach both parents and their offspring on how to cope with stress, how to deal with problems before they turn into larger significant stressors and difficulties, this would have a profound impact."

More information: The paper, "Sensitivity to stress among the offspring of parents with bipolar disorder: a study of daytime cortisol levels," was co-authored by C. S. Ostiguy, M. A. Ellenbogen of Concordia University; C.-D. Walker of the Douglas Hospital Research Centre and McGill University; E. F. Walker of Emory University; S. Hodgins of King's College London, Heidelberg University and the Université de Montréal.

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Provided by Concordia University

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