

body&soul

IN THE SHADOW OF ILLNESS

24's Sean Astin tells OK! how his mom's manic depression affected him

Growing up with a movie-star mom has its perks, but for *Lord of the Rings* actor Sean Astin (currently on the hit series *24*), being the son of Oscar-winner Patty Duke wasn't always glamorous. From as early as Sean can remember, his mom had episodes of high-energy recklessness and periods of extreme lows. Her behavior included suicide attempts, drug dependency, impulsive romances and tantrums. Sean wasn't privy to all of his mom's episodes, but what he did see had a huge impact. "It was terrifying. And you could tell it was terrifying for her, which made it more scary for me," Sean tells *OK!*. "We knew something was off, but we didn't know what, and there was nothing we could do about it." It wasn't until 1982 (Sean was 11 years old), about 12 years after Patty exhibited symptoms, that she was diagnosed with manic depression. This chemical imbalance in the brain is also called bipolar disorder because a person with the illness alternates between the two poles of mania and depression, with mood swings that can last hours, weeks or months. "Before her diagnosis, I didn't understand that my mom's behavior was out of her control, and I would get very angry at her even though I loved her. I thought her suicide attempts and erratic spending were just indulgences. And when she was in a depressed part of her cycle, sleeping for days, I just felt horrible for her," says Sean. Since her diagnosis, Patty's (and her family's) world has

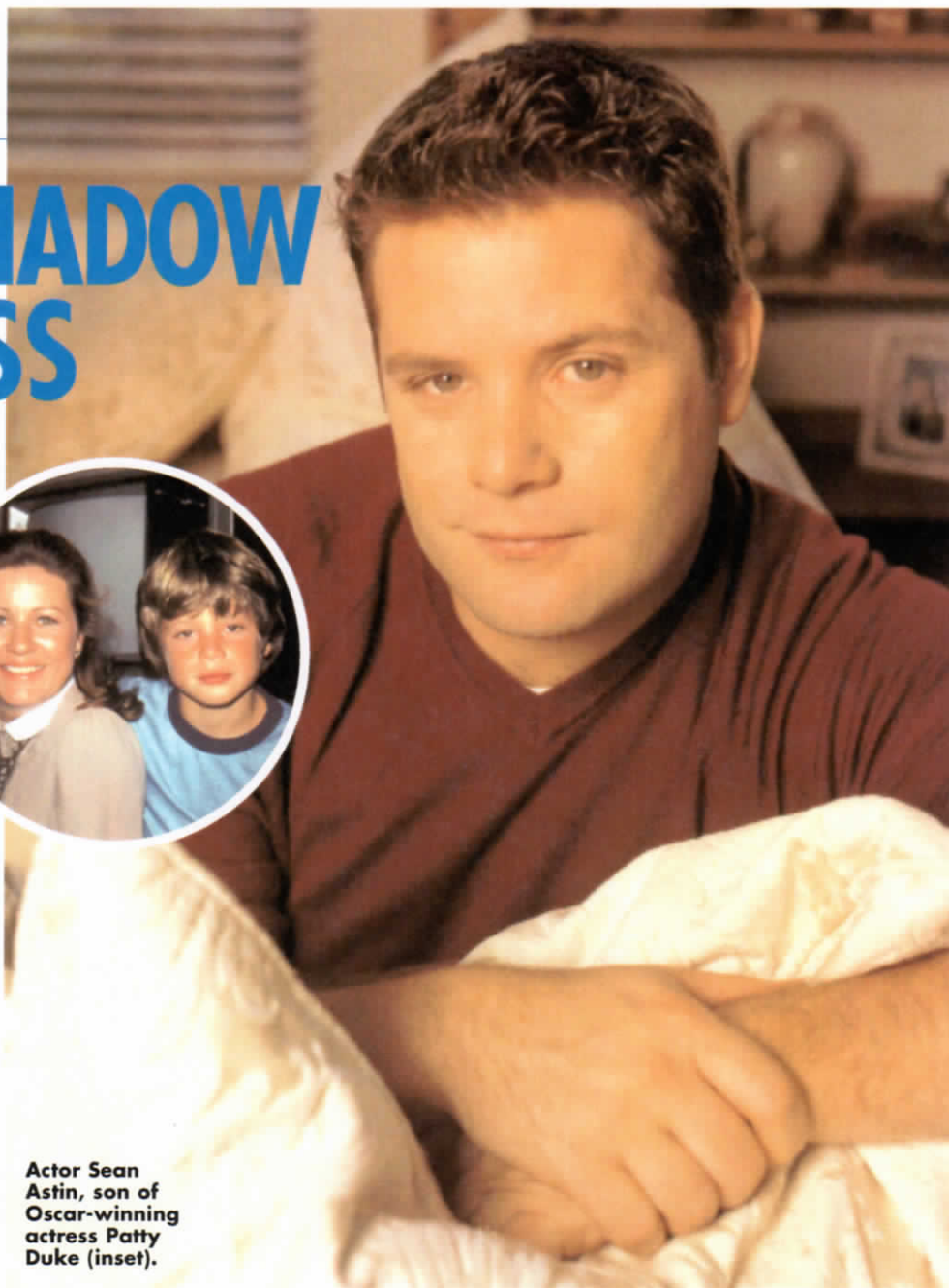


Actor Sean Astin, son of Oscar-winning actress Patty Duke (inset).

'I didn't understand that my mom's behavior was out of her control'

changed. She has gotten treatment, is living a happy life, and has written books about her illness and recovery in order to destigmatize the condition. But most people still don't know what bipolar disorder is, and as a result, they don't get treatment. The average delay between symptom onset and diagnosis is 13 years. So now Sean has taken up the cause of educating people about the disease so that other families don't have to live with bipolar disorder without an accurate diagnosis or effective treatment. Read on to find out what he wants you to know. **OK!**

FEATURE BY RACHEL RABKIN



HOW TO GET HELP

What can you do if you think someone you know is suffering from bipolar disorder? "In general it's good to state your concern to the person. Don't use judgmental terms, but tell them what you're noticing, and ask someone else if they've noticed the same thing," says Dr. Kauffman. Adds Dr. Suppes, "Family and friends can often provide that full picture; they can often see things that the person dealing with manic depression can't." Sean's advice? "It's easy to fail to identify symptoms, so it's important to have open and honest communication with your family, friends and loved ones, and to partner with your doctor," he says.

The good news is that once the illness is diagnosed, it can be treated successfully with antipsychotic medications (not antidepressants) or mood stabilizers

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ASK RACHEL

Our health director answers your top questions



DEAR RACHEL Am I supposed to break out after a facial?

A. No, according to Ettia Tal, owner of Ettia Holistic Day Spa in Manhattan. "The point of a facial is to exfoliate and clean your skin and gently extract impurities without damaging the capillaries or causing blemishes," she says. But frequently, people do break out after facials, says Dr. Sandy Tsao, dermatology procedural director at Harvard Medical School, because of one or a combination of the following reasons: The squeezing of the extractions may irritate or damage the skin; the esthetician may apply a noncomedogenic product to your face; the exfoliation may strip away too many skin layers, leading to an acne flare-up; or you may have a slight reaction to the products used. "But I do not suggest forgoing facials," says Dr. Tsao. "They can be quite rejuvenating and relaxing when done well and can help to improve your skin quality." For best results, talk with your esthetician before your facial about your skin type and any previous reactions you've had to facials, and let her know which products you currently use. This way she can tailor her treatment to your needs.

DEAR RACHEL I heard that desktops collect a lot of bacteria. I eat lunch at my desk. Could I catch something?

A. You bet. In fact, the average desk harbors 400 times more bacteria than the average toilet seat, according to a study by Dr. Charles Gerba, professor of environmental microbiology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. So if you're eating meals at your desk, you're picking up a lot of potentially infectious germs. "A small area on your desk or phone can sustain millions of bacteria that could cause illness," says Dr. Gerba. Which are the most bacteria-ridden areas of the office? Dr. Gerba's study found that office telephones harbor the highest concentration of germs, followed by desks, water-fountain handles, microwave-door handles and computer keyboards. To keep your work area germ-free, wipe down your desktop regularly with a disinfectant like Clorox, keep hand sanitizer at your desk to use throughout the day and wash your hands frequently.

IF YOU HAVE A HEALTH OR FITNESS QUESTION, EMAIL askrachel@ok-magazine.com OR WRITE TO: ASK RACHEL, OKI MAGAZINE, 475 5TH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10017

These answers are not intended to substitute for individual professional care.

WHAT IS BIPOLAR DISORDER?

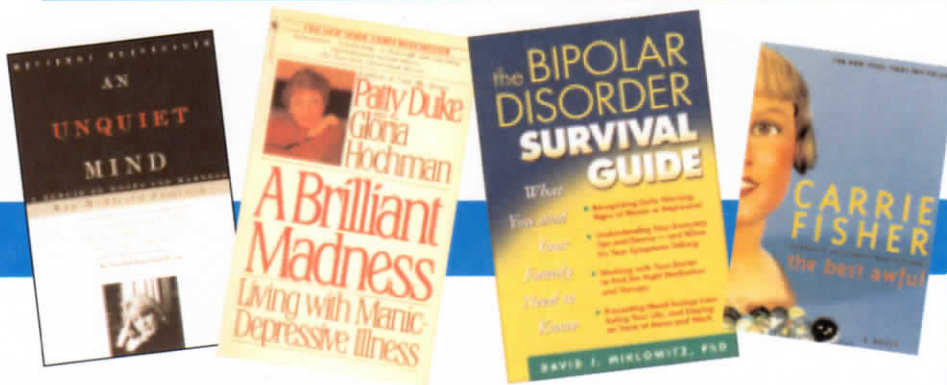
More than two million American adults have bipolar disorder, a chemical imbalance in the brain that usually begins in late adolescence. The illness affects an equal number of men and women, but in men it tends to begin with a manic episode, and in women it usually starts with a depressive episode, which often makes it difficult to distinguish manic depression from classic depression. "We're still learning about the causes, but we do know that bipolar disorder is one of the most genetically inherited psychiatric illnesses," says Dr. Trisha Suppes, director of the Bipolar Disorder Research Program at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. "If you have a parent with the illness, your chance of developing it is about 20 percent."

The symptoms of mania, or the "highs" of bipolar disorder, include increased energy, racing speech, aggressive behavior, impulsive decision-making, irritability, poor judgment and an inflated sense of self-importance. The symptoms of depression, or the "lows" of bipolar disorder, include crying spells, prolonged periods of sleeping, anxiety, lack of appetite, indecisiveness, withdrawal and thoughts of suicide. "The symptoms that should grab people's attention are



Actress Carrie Fisher has spoken out about her bipolar disorder and has written novels about the illness (below).

things like suddenly going out and buying a lot of stuff, or having a big vision or plan that is unsupported by reality," says Dr. Carol Kauffman, assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and a psychologist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass. "It can be very difficult to tell when you're experiencing it. It's much easier for family and friends to spot it."



like lithium that modulate the imbalance of brain chemicals. "People can lead fully normal lives with medication, as we see with Patty Duke, who is doing terrific," says Dr. Suppes. People also may benefit from psychotherapy, which won't replace their medication but will help them manage their illness and recognize their early warning symptoms before they enter into a manic or depressed state.

For more information and resources, log onto learnaboutbipolar.com or the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance at dbsalliance.org.

From left: *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* by Kay Redfield Jamison, \$14, amazon.com; *A Brilliant Madness: Living With Manic-Depressive Illness* by Patty Duke and Gloria Hochman, \$8, amazon.com; *The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide: What You and Your Family Need to Know* by David J. Miklowitz, Ph.D., \$20, amazon.com; *The Best Awful* by Carrie Fisher, \$13, amazon.com