

Family to Family



Telling It Like It Is Working Things Out as a Family

Stories and Wisdom from Families when
a Parent has a Mental Illness

One of a series of five booklets

This booklet is part of a series of 5 booklets called, “Telling It Like It Is”. Booklets in the series include:

- ④ Our Stories
- ④ Working Things Out as a Family
- ④ Families and Recovery
- ④ Children and Parenting
- ④ Going to Hospital

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Who is in your family?

In these booklets family refers to those people who support each other to help children thrive and grow. Children, mums, dads, grandfathers, aunties, grandmothers, step-mums, sisters, step-dads, uncles, brothers, best friends, partners, cousins, neighbours.

How to use this booklet

Families

This booklet is the result of other families reflecting on the things they would have liked to know about or understand earlier in their journey. There is a lot of information in here and we hope it is arranged so you can choose the parts that interest you most. Some people may read it from cover to cover; others may read little bits from time to time. We hope it will help you talk together as a family about the issues that you are facing and the ways you can support each other. Information is included about when and where to seek help. Not all services providers understand all of the issues you may face so take this booklet along with you to share with them.

Children

This booklet is not designed for children. It is designed to help parents understand what might be happening for children and has ideas about ways to support them. Teenagers might like to read these booklets by themselves or with another family member or friend so you can talk about it together. It could provide an opportunity to have the conversations you have not quite got around to. Remember to ask for help if you need it.

Workers

When this booklet was first put together it was offered to some workers with a mental health background to read. What they told us was that the booklet helped them to understand the issues families face when a member experienced a mental health concern. They thought it would be useful to take with them to provide information and have discussions with family members to explore how the issues affected them. They also thought it would be helpful for group discussions.

Introduction

Change is inevitable in any family. This booklet is for families where a parent has a mental illness and is about living with change, problem solving and planning. It has been written by consumers, carers and families in partnership with mental health and family support organisations.

“Talking about how you feel is most important, so things of concern to you can be aired. If this isn’t done, it can make you feel resentful over time”.

Arthur

Living with Change caused by Mental Illness

“If only I’d known how to talk about this with my partner, we could have worked out some things together”.

Anon

Mental illness can be a roller-coaster ride for any family, lots of new experiences, unpredictability and change from how things used to be. Change in any family situation can be a time of role confusion. There may be periods of time during which the parent with the mental illness might not be able to do the things they usually do, so the other parent or family members may step in and look after the kids, do the household chores or become the main money earner. Sometimes the children will start looking after the unwell parent instead of the other way around. There will probably be times when people become angry that things have changed. This is a normal response; anger is part of grief and coming to terms with what has happened.

“Things may have changed....but they can be different in a good way if we give ourselves and others time to get used to the changes”.

Anon

It is important to consider how these changes impact on children and how to provide support to help them through these times. The best people to talk with kids about what is happening are their parents. The more that both parents can find the time to listen to their children and ask them about how they are feeling and explore what has changed for them in their relationships and around the house, the easier it will be for them to cope.

It helps if they have a supportive adult in their life who is there to listen to them and who are open to talking about the experience of having a parent with a mental illness. This may be a grandparent, an aunt/uncle, a teacher, a school chaplain or a family friend. Youth workers or other professionals are good supports too. Church youth groups and Councils run youth centres can also be a great source of stability and friendship for teenagers.

Some other things that are important in family life:

- 1. Being aware that each person's needs change over time; this is true for everyone in every family.
- 2. Retaining belief in, and hope for recovery for everyone.
- 3. Letting go of some of the expectations you may have had.
- 4. Being flexible.
- 5. Learning signs and cues that indicate that the parent with a mental illness is becoming unwell. Sometimes a person's family or friends can notice these before they do.
- 6. Learning signs and cues that indicate that other family members or the children are not managing the situation.
- 7. Having regular check-ins during the day or week to take stock together and talk about how everyone is doing.
- 8. Recognising and celebrating the way each of you is managing well.
- 9. Recognising and celebrating the ways you are able to support each other.

Problem Solving

“You get a problem and its like “Oh my god, how am I going to solve it? So you have to break it down into chunks. What is most urgent? Prioritise. Remember that most people have problems”.

Pia

Problems are an inevitable part of life, and learning how to cope with what ever comes up is important. When we become anxious about problems, stress can make it impossible to focus, or to do anything constructive. Then we get even more stressed! If this is happening to you, try these steps:

- ④ Write a list of all the things that are worrying you.
- ④ Put them in order of most important to least important.
- ④ Write down something you can do about the top one or two problems, and decide not to think about the rest on your list until you've started to tackle these.
- ④ Sometimes the answers may not seem obvious. Ask for help or seek advice to help you make an informed decision. This can give a different perspective of the problem and provide support as your family works through it.
- ④ The solution may have nothing to do with the original problem!! By talking about what is happening together, you may find that the problem wasn't what it seemed and that there is a way of fixing it.

There are many good agencies, help lines, websites and support groups that may be able to assist you and your family. Ask for help or seek advice so as to make an informed decision. Talk to your partner, mum, dad, brother, sister, aunty, uncle, cousins, GP and your friends; they can often give you a different perspective of the problem and support you as you work through it.

“Problems are only problems whilst we do not deal with them. It is the fear of the unknown that often stops us moving past the problems. I write the problem down and ask myself, “Will I die from this problem?” It takes on a different meaning after that. I am able to process it in a more logical way. Talking to someone about the problem and getting another view point helps us to clarify what the problem is really all about”.

Anon

Remember that making mistakes is inevitable and healthy; mistakes are evidence that we are learning! The important thing is to talk about what has happened together and learn from the experience; maybe you will do it differently next time. Affirm each other’s willingness to try new ways of dealing with a problematic or stressful situation.

Family Problem Solving

Sometimes issues come up that affect the whole family. For example it may be a family member’s behaviour causing problems, working within a tight family budget, deciding where to go for a holiday, or whether to get a pet. Each family has different ways of working these sorts of things out. One approach for families to work through problems together is:

- 1. Get the family together at a time that suits everyone. Make sure there is plenty of time to talk and nobody has to rush off.
- 2. Define what the problem actually is. This can take a while because each person has a different view! Try and be specific as possible. Use statements such as ‘I don’t like it when happens’ rather than blaming.
- 3. Sometimes we can feel like the ‘problem’ is overwhelming. Ask ‘when does this happen?’, ‘how often does this happen?’, ‘what percentage of our time is it actually bothering us?’ This can help to put things into perspective.

- ④ Think about the sorts of things you have already tried – what has worked before, what hasn't?
- ④ Look for the times when the problem doesn't seem to happen or is not as bad. Look at the reasons why this is so.
- ④ Brainstorm possible solutions – make sure each person puts forward at least one idea. Refrain from criticising or talking about the ideas, just write them all down – even the ones that sound silly!
- ④ Go through the list and pick the options that you want to explore further.
- ④ Write down the pros and cons of each of the chosen ideas.
- ④ Discuss possible solution(s) and identify what each person thinks as the best option. Be prepared to compromise so that the solution is fair to everyone in the family.
- ④ Think about the skills and strengths you each have and think about the skills and strengths and resources you might need to bring about this solution. If you don't have all the ones you need, think about who else might be able to help you with them. (Uncle Ted's got a motor bike he might lend us, your friend Barbara is a great cook).
- ④ Figure out what steps you need to take to put that solution into practice and decide who's going to do what.
- ④ Get a clear picture together of how things will be when the 'problem' is solved. It is really important to know very specifically how you want things to be so you know when you have achieved it. Work out what you will do to celebrate when things are the way you want them to be.
- ④ Do it! Implement your plan.
- ④ Make a time to get together afterwards and talk about how it went. What worked or didn't work. Was everyone happy with the process and the outcome? How would you do it differently next time you have a problem? What have you learnt? What skills have you noticed in each other that you hadn't noticed before?

Sometimes the problem or issue just can't be solved, even with thorough problem solving strategies and trying lots of different tactics. In this situation it may be more useful to focus on developing coping strategies. For example if the behaviour or attitude of a family member is not going to change, then the other family members may need to work out ways of learning to manage how they feel or act so that they don't become upset.

(Adapted from www.reachout.com.au – Problem Solving)

Family Toolbox

A toolbox is something that you keep your tools in for fixing things. A family toolbox is all the resources that belong to your family that can be used when working through any problems. For example, mum may be really good at listening if something is worrying you, dad may know how to look at the bright side of a story, the dog likes being taken for a walk if someone needs some time out, everyone likes going to the beach together, even when things get a bit tense.

Create your own family toolbox with tools that anyone can get out to help the family when there's trouble, or when things feel like they're breaking down. Here are some more examples from our toolboxes:

- 1. Stop, take a few deep breaths. Light a candle & for 10 minutes, each think about how we would like the situation to end. Then listen to each other's ideas.
- 2. Call mum/dad's case worker and ask them to come over and help us work out what we can do.
- 3. Have a game of monopoly, cards or footy.
- 4. Talking stick - each person gets a turn to talk for 2 minutes about how they are feeling or what they want to do - no interruptions!
- 5. Write a note to each other to let them know how you feel or how something has helped. You could get a box and decorate it to put the notes in. This could be a fun way to play together.

Making Plans

Most people have plans – what will they do on the weekend, how they want their career to progress, who will pick the kids up from school when I am at work. When a parent has a mental illness these plans sometimes have to go on hold, change or not be used anymore. New plans may need to be developed. There are different types of plans that can be useful:

Everyday Plans: These plans define everyone’s roles. It may include chore rosters, childcare arrangements, weekly routines. The plans may be ongoing i.e. Dad takes Sam to footy training every Saturday morning or the plan may change as circumstances change i.e. Mum will drop Tim at his friends place for a birthday party on her way to work. These plans may be written down on a calendar or in a diary or on a note on the fridge.

Life Dreams: Some people may write down their personal goals in a journal or on a ‘to do’ list. They may make New Year resolutions. Some goals may be just dreams i.e. to ski across Antarctica. Others may be more tangible i.e. to learn to bake bread from scratch. Each of these things gives us something to aim for and we may break them down into smaller steps which we enjoy undertaking such as learning to ski, going to a baking class. Sometimes the journey is more fun than the outcome and may be a good way to meet people with similar interests.

Crisis Plans: What if something goes wrong or something unexpected happens? Crisis planning involves looking at possible risks or worst case scenarios and having some discussion about what needs to be done in that situation. For example, we have found it useful to plan for the possibility that the parent with the illness may go to hospital. Questions such as who will pay the bills, do the kids need to stay with their grandparents, who needs to be told, may need to be answered.

WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plans): – Mary Ellen Copeland, an American woman who lives with mental illness, has developed the WRAP program. This sort of planning assists people to work at staying well and to have a plan in place in the event they become unwell. WRAP encourages people to identify what triggers may negatively affect their mental health and what the warning signs are that show that things aren't going too well. People develop a plan about what they need to do when they are becoming unwell – i.e. self care strategies, contacting people etc. Take a look at www.mentalhealthrecovery.com for more information or contact Ruah on 9227 7012 to find out more about WRAP.

Children's Plans: Some children who have a parent with a mental illness experience a lot of stress around what is going to happen to them if their parent becomes unwell or goes to hospital. They may be worried about being taken away from their parent (especially in single parent families) or how they are going to get to school or who is going to look after them. It can be very helpful to have a plan that is developed in partnership with the child so that they know exactly what is going to happen in the event the parent becomes unwell and who they can contact to get help or support. Write this plan down so that the child has a copy of their own and which contains important phone numbers and information they may need if they are staying away from their parents. Make sure that everyone else involved in the children's life – family, friends, school, service providers - also have a copy of the plan and are agreeable to it.

Here are some important details that should be put into the plan¹:

- ④ Telephone numbers and addresses of my mum, dad, grandparents, other adults in my life. This list may also include GP, service providers, teacher, sports coach etc.
- ④ Where am I going to stay when my parent is in hospital? Who will take me there?
- ④ Is there anything important that people need to know about me, i.e. dietary restrictions, allergies, medication, cultural/religious practices, out of school activities?
- ④ What do I need to bring with me if I am staying away from home, i.e. clothes, school uniform, favourite toy, photos, medication, pets, books?
- ④ How will I stay in contact with my parent/s – will they ring me, what number can I ring them, where can I post a letter?
- ④ Who will let me know what is going on and answer any questions I may have?
- ④ Will someone remember my birthday?
- ④ What will happen if I get sick? What is my Medicare number? Who can sign a consent form for me?
- ④ What will happen to my pet?

Parenting Plans: For effective parenting, the people who are taking on parenting roles in the children's life need to have a consistent and agreed way on how they are going to look after your children. For example decisions about discipline, bed times, eating, what to do if the child becomes sick etc need to be discussed so that everyone is clear. By having a unified approach, children have an understanding about what is expected of them and what they can expect from the adults looking after them.

¹ Adapted from *Supporting Our Family* kit.

So what happens from here?

We hope that this booklet has helped your family to think about how you live with change, work through problems and make plans. This is information that is useful for most families but in particular when one of the parents has a mental illness and there is a chance they may go to hospital.

“As a family we have a weekly family meeting to go through one or more of each person’s behaviour that has affected other family members during the week. We talk about how we can change the behaviour or how we can change the event so it won’t happen again. Also we do a one-stop shop every evening to check in where everyone’s at - if work was hard or how was school or as simple as asking if voices were bad today and why? How can we make it easier? This has worked well for our family in last few years”.

The ‘F’ family

Ideas or thoughts you have about your family plans

This space is for you to write ideas or thoughts you have about:

- (i) What your family need to work out.
- (ii) What would be helpful for your family to plan?

Need Information and Assistance?

Start with your GP. They can be a great source of information and are able to link in with some specialist counselling and other services through Medicare.

Hospitals, Community Health Centres, Mental Health Clinics, Centrelink and the Education Department all have social workers or psychologists who can provide information and support or advise you about appropriate services.

In An Emergency (24 hr)

Mental Health Emergency Response Line	1300 555 788
Peel/Mandurah	1800 676 822
Country WA (Rural Link)	1800 552 002
Crisis Care	9223 1111
	1800 199 008

Need Support?

Women's Information Service	6217 8230 1800 199 174
ARAFMI Mental Health Carers & Friends Association Incorporated	www.arafmi.asn.au 9427 7100/1800 811 747
Carers WA	1300 227 377 www.carerswa.asn.au www.youngcarers.net.au
Commonwealth Respite & Carelink Centre	1800 052 222
Wanslea Family Services	9245 2441 www.wanslea.asn.au
Women's Health Care House	922 8122 www.whs.org.au
Clan Indigo Project	9498 2829 www.clanwa.com.au
Youth Focus	9361 4222 www.youthfocus.com.au
Yorgum Aboriginal Family Counselling Service	9218 9477 www.yorgum.org.au

Someone To Talk To? (24 hr Help Lines)

Carer Counselling Line	1800 007 332
Family Help Line	1800 643 000
Kids Help Line	1800 551 800 www.kidshelp.com.au
Mens Line	1300 789 978 www.menslineaus.org.au
Parenting Line	1800 654 432

Want Some More Information?

Children of Parents with Mental Illness Resource Centre	www.copmi.net.au
Office of Mental Health	www.mental.health.wa.gov.au 9222 4099
SANE	www.sane.org.au 1800 187 263
Seniors Telephone Information Service	1800 671 233

Not Getting What You Need?

Health Consumers Council	9221 3422 1800 620 780
Mental Health Law Centre	3928 8266 1800 620 285
Office of Chief Psychiatrist www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm	9222 4462
Council of Official Visitors	9226 3266 1800 999 057

Family to Family

Raising a family is both a joy and a struggle at the best of times. Having a mental illness in the family adds pressure.

The Family to Family booklets arises from a group of family members reflecting on their journey when a parent experiences a mental illness. They have found that services usually offer support to only a 'part' of the family: Consumers, Carers or Children. A Family To Family Reference Group that included the whole family was created and from that this series of booklets evolved.

The Family to Family Reference Group believes that their families would have managed better, learnt from each other, and found better ways of supporting each other if they had an opportunity to spend time with each other exploring how everyone is affected by the presence of a mental illness.

This series of booklets have been written as a partnership between these families and organisations:



Supported by 
Printed February 2009

The information and advice provided is made available in good faith and derived from sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of printing.