

Family to Family



Telling It Like It Is Children and Parenting

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:

- 📖 Our Stories
- 📖 Working things out as a Family
- 📖 Families and Recovery
- 📖 Children and Parenting
- 📖 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

Most parents, with or without a mental illness, want the best for their children but frequently find parenting a challenge. Most of us struggle with the changing demands of each developmental stage that a child goes through as he or she grows up.

One of the biggest challenges for those of us who are parents living with mental illness is to manage our feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Our mental state influences the way we act as people and as parents, the way things are done around the home, and the routines that are part of our family's life. At the same time, our parenting responsibilities influence what's going on in our head, and so does our children's behaviour, just like any parent. The more opportunities we have to discuss these challenges, the more likely we are to be able to keep our efforts in perspective (i.e. not judge ourselves too harshly, or not notice things we should be paying attention to).

It's hard enough for a parent who has never had mental illness to know when he or she is going crazy!! When we've had real cause to doubt our perceptions of the world, working out how to respond to our child's needs can be an enormous strain. It can be hard to work out whether things are happening because of the effects of the illness, because the children are behaving in a way that is normal for their developmental stage or because something completely unrelated is impacting on how people in the family are feeling or behaving.

Don't get us wrong, it is not all bad, and many of us who have been a child of a parent with mental illness have grown up to be happy and healthy and have families of our own. However, we know from personal experience, as well as from the stories told and research done with children and adults who have a parent with mental illness that there is a higher risk that they will experience a mental health issue or other difficulty themselves.

This booklet provides some information about some of the issues that face families where mental illness is present and looks at strategies that may be useful in managing the parenting role. It

has been written in partnership by people who come from families where there is parental mental illness and a group of health professionals.

“A lot of the stuff you’re thinking and feeling is normal parenting stuff, not the mental illness”.

Pia

The Impact of Mental Illness on Families

Mental illness affects not only the person who has been diagnosed but also their partner, their kids, their parents, their sisters and brothers, the rest of their extended family and their friends. This can be a positive effect; relationships can become closer through adversity, people learn about their strengths they would never have known about otherwise, and new skills and knowledge are developed.

However, mental illness like physical illness or other life changing events usually brings with it negative effects that we can struggle to adjust to and that impact on people in different ways.

The following table shows how some people in the family may experience mental illness. As you can see, all sorts of things can come up for people. Common feelings include guilt, anger, distress, sadness, frustration, grief, confusion and loss of hope. Some people feel relief when a diagnosis is finally made as it gives an explanation of why things have been the way they have and they can begin getting treatment. Other people feel they are being labelled with something they do not agree with and may not want any medical intervention. Whatever the case, your family’s journey with mental illness will be unique to you and you will find your own ways of dealing with things as they come up.

The Impact of Mental Illness on Families¹	
<p>Parents of person with illness Being a carer (for person with illness and/or grandchildren) Grief and loss Guilt and responsibility Intrusions into family life Marital stress Financial burden</p>	<p>Siblings of person with illness Grief and loss Sense of being the ‘forgotten’ family member Guilt Anger / frustration Stigma Fear of developing illness too</p>
<p>Parent with mental illness Managing symptoms Grief and loss Relationship conflict Being a sole parent Fear that child will inherit illness Fear that children will be taken away Financial hardship Housing problems Social isolation Stigma Lack of acknowledgement of parenting role</p>	<p>Parenting partner (spouse / significant other) Grief and loss Marital / relationship problems Illness as a ‘third member’ in the relationship Difficult choices ‘Single’ parenting some or all of the time Financial hardship Stigma Being a carer</p>
<p>Children of a parent with mental illness Grief and loss Guilt / self blame Parenting the parent Being a carer Fear of developing the illness Stigma, teasing at school Relationship difficulties with parent Confusion Lack of stability Worried about making parent unwell – ‘walking on eggshells’ Being ‘invisible to services—nobody listening’ Parent not ‘being there’ – physically and/or emotionally</p>	

¹ Adapted from Ruah Community Service, 2006, *Inside a Family Under Pressure: The Impact of Parental Mental Illness on the Family*

Mental Illness and Grief

Most people have a dream about what their future will be like; career, children, lifestyle, and travel. Mental illness often disrupts these life plans and families find they have to reassess their dreams over time to fit with new realities. There may be a sense of loss in the family as things aren't how they used to be.

Grief is an emotion that we usually associate with dying, but people can feel grief whenever something they value is lost or changes. When someone experiences mental illness, they may grieve for their lost good health as well as its effects such as reduced concentration, poor memory and difficulty with decision making. For many it may mean some time off work or loss of job. Relationships can suffer under the strain of the symptoms and certainly psychotic episodes are very stressful for everyone and may be traumatic and frightening for the person and whoever is trying to help them get some treatment. Sometimes relationships can breakdown under this sort of strain over time.

Family members may grieve because their relationship with the person is no longer the same and their hopes and expectations for the person (and possibly themselves) have changed. What makes this sort of grief really hard is that it sometimes feels like there is nothing tangible that has been lost; the person hasn't died and there may not be any changes that can be seen on the outside. However, everyone in the family knows that things are different. This is called ambiguous loss.

Grief can cause us to feel all sorts of emotions. Some professionals believe there are five different stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. People can go backwards and forwards through these stages. However, some people believe this model is too simplistic and does not describe grief at all. The main thing to understand is that we all grieve at some point and we all do it differently. The important thing is to talk about it together with our family and the people who we trust so that we have support to work through the feelings and make some meaning of our experience.

“I never realised how much it had affected my children by me going in and out of hospital so many, many times over 26 years. You see, I experienced this myself growing up with this from birth with my mother going in and out of hospital. On realising this I began to feel the ambiguous loss - it’s a loss that can never be finished like when some one dies (you know they are gone as their body has gone). When your parent has a mental illness they seem to die before your eyes every time they become depressed. For me it was when my mother looked like a statue in her catatonic state. It becomes unfinished grief and you do not know you have it. Paula Boss has written some good books about this topic”.

Margaret

As people begin working through their grief, they do see that it is possible to find joy in the day again, that although life may never be the same, they can move forward and start on their journey of recovery. This is not to say that there are not going to be bad days, setbacks or disappointments but rather an acceptance that they will do the best they can under the circumstances.

“There’s a grieving process **for everyone in the family**. I did all my grieving internally, and then years later it all came out - you can become very angry towards your parents. But that needn’t be. If that is worked through when you’re in the process of going through it can be very healing”.

Pauline

The Impact of Mental Illness on Parenting

Having a mental illness and being a parent can be really hard work! Not only are there symptoms to battle with, but often the side effects of medication impact how a person feels. Symptoms and side effects may include anxiety, excessive tiredness, hallucinations, lack of motivation, little pleasure in things that usually make a person happy, paranoia, lack of insight into the illness and decreased ability to make decisions. Sometimes what makes it even more difficult is when other people don't recognise what a huge effect the symptoms are having, and assume the person with the illness is just being lazy or over-dramatic and that they need to 'snap out of it'.

"I wish I had known earlier that situations which anger and frustrate "normal" people can produce inappropriate over-the-top reactions when I am unwell".

Anon

If we are not prepared and don't have good supports in place and are not managing our illness as well as we could, our children can miss out on some important opportunities. Talking with your partner and family and friends about any symptoms and side effects is an important starting place to work out how you can support each other in helping your children to grow and develop and support them in the challenges they face.

"One of the greatest things when I went through all of that was just to have someone to cook a meal, or take my girl to school".

Pauline

The Impact of Parenting on Mental Illness

The joys and stresses of having children can affect our mental health, both in positive and negative ways.

- Parenting can help us to stay focussed, have daily routines, bring joy and meaning to our lives in ways that help us keep symptoms under control.

“It helps to have a daily routine to help you stay focussed and provide structure for your child. Celebrate achievements and milestones in your child’s life and acknowledge your contribution. You have worked hard and deserve to be recognised. Congratulate each other!”

- Having a little person who needs you and loves you unconditionally is an amazing feeling and can boost your spirits, give meaning to your life and encourage hope for the future.

“Remember that that your child loves you for being you – it doesn’t matter what you look like, how much money you have or don’t have or whether you have a mental illness. Love them back!”

- The ongoing stress of parenting may make the symptoms of a pre-existing illness worse, particularly if you do not much support or if the child has developmental or behavioural problems that are difficult to cope with.

“Look after yourself! Take time to do things that are relaxing or nurturing. Make sure you both build in some time together. Make time to meet with other parents at a playgroup or barbeque. It helps to share stories and information”.

- Ⓢ Becoming a new parent is a really big event and can be very stressful. Your life will change dramatically!! Sometimes the stress may trigger an episode of the mental illness. Post natal depression is the most common type of illness and this affects about 15% of women. However, there are good supports available to assist you and your partner.

“Think about the practical and emotional supports you will both need before during and after the birth. Where will the baby be born? Who will you ask to support you? What needs to be organised at home and who will help for at least the first few weeks?”

- Ⓢ Some parents living with mental illness feel pressure to be the perfect parent and have unrealistic expectations of themselves. This may lead to you becoming so stressed that it affects your mental health.

“Nobody can be a perfect parent. Be easy on yourself. Set realistic goals – ones that you can achieve. Meet with other parents to share stories and keep things in perspective”.

- Ⓢ Some parents with a mental illness may put off getting help or going to hospital because they are worried about what will happen to their children or who will look after them. Putting off getting help when you need it will not help your family. Your symptoms may become worse and you may become very unwell!

“Have a plan for the children for when you are in hospital. Talk about the plan with all the people involved – the other parent, grandparents, friends and service providers”.

Pregnancy, Birth and Depression

Some women may have an increased risk of experiencing depression during pregnancy and after the birth of their baby. Antenatal depression occurs during pregnancy and if left untreated may increase the chance of having postnatal depression. Postnatal depression is different from the 'Baby Blues' which usually only lasts for a few days after the birth. Postnatal depression can start a few weeks later, can last over a long period of time and can make a woman feel depressed, lethargic, physically unwell and cause her to not have much pleasure in her baby or life in general. Antenatal and postnatal depression can be treated using medication and/or good counselling – talk to your treating doctor, the child health nurse, the WA Perinatal Mental Health Unit or one of the parenting lines. Dads are also affected by their partner's depression, so it is important that they get some information and support too. Some organisations offer education programs and support that both parents can access, either together or individually. The Beyondblue and Black Dog Institute websites also have some useful information about risk factors, symptoms, treatments and services. Check them out at www.beyondblue.org.au and www.blackdoginstitute.org.au .

“Plan ahead. Seek out the support and information you need during the pregnancy. Talk with your GP and your mental health professionals to get the best advice about managing your medication and nutrition throughout the pregnancy. Become aware of the signs and symptoms of PND and talk with your child health nurse and your partner. You and your partner will be better prepared if you find out about things together. Antenatal services encourage Dads to join in”.

Anon

Parenting Partnerships

This booklet has talked about parenting from the perspective of the parent diagnosed with a mental illness, but what about the other parent? You too are affected by the mental illness and may be experiencing a mixed bag of feelings about the situation. It is really important that you seek support through family, friends and appropriate services so to maintain your own mental, physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Regardless of whether couples stay together in a committed relationship or whether they separate after having children, it is important that a parenting partnership is developed. This partnership is based on the idea that both of you want the best for your children and are willing to work together to provide a united approach. This way, the children have a consistent, safe and supportive framework to grow up in. As partners you can plan together in case there are events where the parent with the mental illness is unwell or hospitalised so that the needs of the children are still being met and both of you feel supported by the arrangements you have in place. Parenting partnerships may be developed with significant others such as the childrens' grandparents, other relatives or close friend/s who are willing to assist in the parenting role.

If you are the parent that doesn't live with your children, you can still keep the relationship going in ways that are helpful and healing for everyone, regardless of whether you see them regularly or only occasionally. We appreciate that this can take a lot of effort in some situations but it is worth it, and there are services around that can you help work things out.

Having Strong Parenting Partnerships

- ④ Take time to explore how ebb and flow of the symptoms of the illness affects your relationship. Does any of you become irritated, frustrated and/or confused because you are not sure what's going on?
- ④ Together seek good information about the mental illness, signs and symptoms, medication and its effects and side effects. Explore strategies to support each other.
- ④ Talk about how you will know when the parent with the illness is becoming unwell – what are their triggers to becoming unwell, what are the early signs and symptoms, what do they need to do, what can you do to help, or who do each of you need to talk to?
- ④ Talk, talk talk! Discuss parenting strategies so that the children have clear boundaries, expectations and know what acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is. What sort of people do you want your children to grow up to be?
- ④ Asking for help shows that you are responsible and concerned parents. Finding out about services that may provide practical assistance or other support means that you are looking out for the best interests of your family. These days it is very common for people not to have the help and support of extended families.
- ④ Plan together for 'just in case' the parent with the illness becomes unwell or needs to go to hospital. Who needs to be told? Will you need childcare? Who will pick the kids up from school? What do we tell the school? Who does the cooking? Remember that although the older kids may be able to pitch in and help out more than normal, it should not be their role to be the main carer of the unwell parent or younger children.

- 🌐 Take time to do fun things together as a family. Nurture your relationships with each other and your children.
- 🌐 Other people who are important to your child/ren (aunties, uncles, grandparents or family friends) can play an important role in supporting you as a parent. Talk with them too.
- 🌐 Both of you need to talk with your children about what is happening; they usually pick up on when something is not right and it is better to tell them about mental illness in a way that they will understand rather than leaving them to guess and think the wrong thing. The parent/s with mental illness is the best people to talk to their children about mental illness and how it affects them. Some kids blame themselves or believe they will 'catch it' or believe other myths. There are great children's books that will help you to explain things to your children. The local library may have some of these available for different ages or visit www.copmi.net.au.

Strengthening Your Parenting Partnership

This space is for you to write ideas or thoughts you may have about strengthening your parenting partnerships.

(i) Who supports you?

(ii) What do you need to talk about together?

Tips from Parents and Partners

As with any family, there are times when things feel like they are getting a bit out of hand. These are some things that we have found to be in times of stress.

- ④ If you're too stressed or exhausted to be loving with your children, try doing something simple for them instead – if you know you've been cranky for days, pick up some lollipops at the shop, or their favourite TV dinner, or write a card. This communicates that you still care even though you might be short-tempered or emotionally unavailable.
- ④ Sleep – Are you getting enough? Not getting enough rest can make you cranky, stressed and for some people, make their symptoms worse. Sometimes leaving the housework or those things 'I should do' and getting a good night's sleep is a much more effective way of using your time. You will wake feeling refreshed and having more energy to do all the things you want to.
- ④ Guilty feelings – Keep focussed on what 'you can do' not on 'what you haven't done'. If your 3 year old has a can of baked beans for dinner, don't beat yourself up about it! He's had dinner, and baked beans are very nutritious. They're a lot better than take away, and if you asked if he wanted baked beans or roast dinner, he'd probably choose the beans.
- ④ Take some time before school holidays to write a plan of activities for each day. Include some high-energy outdoor expeditions and some quiet home based projects. Use the quiet times to renew your own energy. You will find ideas for inexpensive activities through the local council, in your community newspaper or in "Kids in Perth", a free newspaper with advice and activities.²

² www.kidsinperth.com

Parental Mental Illness and Child Development

Children have different needs depending on their own personalities and their developmental stage. Research has found that in early childhood, the brain is shaped by the environment the child is growing up in and the experiences s/he has³.

0-3 years

When babies are born they are already trying to communicate and as parents there is a lot to look out for. Unless we look carefully and learn to recognise our babies' attempts to communicate we can miss important opportunities to build our relationship with them and support attachment and bonding. This is the foundation for a sense of safety, security and trust in the world.

Babies and very young children need to have all their senses stimulated – touch, sight, hearing, taste, smelling to help their brain develop. Time needs to be spent encouraging motor skills and coordination. Babies also need to form an attachment with their mother and father, so that they build up a sense of being safe, that someone is there to, feed them, pick them up and generally look after them.

When a mother experiences postnatal depression or other mental illness, it can really affect how she is able to parent. If she is feeling depressed and unmotivated to look after herself, it will be immensely difficult to look after a baby. Sometimes she is able to feed and do the practical things the baby needs but feels unable to do the things needed to help the baby feel content and loved or develop their new skills. For some women, giving birth can really impact how she feels or in rare instances cause psychosis. It is REALLY important to get some medical help when this happens.

³ Thomas, K. 2006, *Early Childhood: Laying the Foundations for Life*,

Dads too can experience mental health difficulties after the birth of a child as they adapt to their new role and support their partner. Having a child can sometimes bring up old emotions about things that have happened in the past which can be distressing and it is a good idea to deal with these through counselling or other means if possible. For a man already living with mental illness, fatherhood and its associated stresses can affect how he is feeling and may contribute to experiencing symptoms.

Both parents will benefit from spending time talking together to work out the best ways of supporting each other in the parenting task. It takes awhile to work these things out so be patient and keep talking.

So what can you do?

- ④ Start planning before the birth – make sure you have the supports your family needs in place before it all happens. This may include negotiating roles or tasks with family and friends, or referring to services that can provide practical assistance or emotional / psychological support.
- ④ Go together to the antenatal classes that are offered to support your health and wellbeing during pregnancy. Learn as much as you can to prepare yourselves for the birth and looking after a new baby. Antenatal classes are often a good way to make friends with other expectant parents and this can become a source of mutual support after your babies are born.
- ④ Discuss your medication and treatment with your health professionals to make sure you feel comfortable and are well informed about balancing the needs of your growing baby with managing your illness.
- ④ Talk to someone if you are feeling depressed, feel like you are not coping or feel that you are experiencing symptoms of your mental illness. This person may be your GP, child

health nurse, key worker, psychiatrist, friends or people in your family.

- ④ Get some help! You do not have to do this alone – it is okay to let family or friends help out, cook you dinner, and look after the baby while you have a sleep or some time out.
- ④ Don't be hard on yourself. Having a baby requires a huge adjustment in the family and it takes time for everyone to get used to having a new little person around.
- ④ Celebrate the birth of your child and include family and friends.
- ④ Breastfeeding is supported as the best option for you and your baby. Lots of women need some specialist help to get this established. Talk with your midwife or health professional to help you get started and to discuss any implications of medications for your baby.
- ④ If you are having any difficulties seek some help. It's important to remember that any stress you are experiencing will affect your mental health and the quality of your baby's experience.
- ④ Your local child health nurse is one of the best sources of information and support during the first two years. They have lots of information and can help you work out ways of supporting your baby's development.

3-5 years

As babies grow into small children, they start to learn how to control their emotions, solve problems and develop their many social skills. Children in this age range start to realise that they are their own person and will try very hard to be independent. This is an important part of their development but because they

are just learning, it often involves many tears and tantrums but also times when your child will have great insight and will remind you of the beauty and joy in the little things.

For parents living with mental illness, there can be many challenges. For a parent feeling depressed or experiencing psychosis, it may be difficult to respond to the demands of a young child. If there is no other adult who can provide some consistent parenting, then the child may be at risk of not being fed or washed properly or being supervised appropriately. They may become distressed, experience high levels of stress, have poor experience of attachment (which can mean having a poor sense of security, trust, self esteem) and take on responsibilities beyond their years. Sometimes they can be involved in the parent's delusions and not have healthy role models who can teach about problem solving, socialising, and other important life lessons. There are times when a parent is unwell, when they are unable to take their child to activities such as playgroup and other activities in which the child would have opportunities to meet and play with other children and to learn new skills. This can affect their development as well.

Here are some ideas that we think are useful for when you have a child of this age:

- ④ We all want to do the best for our children and no one does it all on their own. Keep talking with your partner, parents and friends with children the same age. This is the way most people find their way through the early years of parenting. There is a lot to learn, and when we are tired or have lots of things on our mind we can judge ourselves or our children harshly. Share the load, sort things out with partners and friends.
- ④ Make sure you and your child participate in playgroups and pre-school activities – this will give them more opportunities to boost their confidence, social skills and overall development. If you can't take them yourself, see if the other parent or another trusted person can.

- Use parenting services (centres, phone lines, support services) to find out information about your child's developmental needs and what you can do to help them learn the things they need to.
- Keep talking with your GP, psychiatrist and key worker about your mental health so that it does not get to crisis point. They may be able to help refer you to services that can provide assistance.

“If the birth of a child is beautiful the life of a child can be beautifully rewarding”.

Daniel (a dad with paranoid schizophrenia)

5-12 years

The primary school years are pretty exciting as well as challenging for a child! They are interacting much more with the world outside the family – at school, making friends with other kids in the street, joining clubs and sport teams. They are starting to understand things more and be able to make sense of their environment. They are learning new skills at school and are able to articulate more about what they are thinking and how they are feeling.

If you and your child have had positive preschool years where they have gained some confidence in making friends and learning new things this prepares them well for school.

Some schools encourage parents to become familiar with the school and get to know how it works even before your child attends. They may have playgroups or open days which mean you can get to know the other parents as well.

If you feel confident with the school, your child is likely to feel more confident too. Going to school is a big transition for your child and for you too. The more prepared you all are the better

it's likely to go.

There are a few issues that may arise for families at this time. The children may blame themselves for the parent's mental health and any other problems, which may result in them experiencing poor self esteem, guilt, fear, anxiety and a whole range of other emotions. During this time, children work hard at school to fit in and if their parent is behaving oddly or there is tension or chaos at home, then the child may feel embarrassed or shame and not want their friends to come home or meet their family. Some kids take on a carer role and will actively look after the parent with the mental illness; this may include preparing meals, reminding them to take their tablets, looking after younger siblings. This mix-up in roles can be really hard on the child and it is up to the adults in their life to make sure they are not taking on too much responsibility and that they are given opportunities to just be kids.

Helping your primary school aged child:

- ④ Children need to have age appropriate information about their parent's mental illness. Children understand and accept this information much more easily from the parent with the mental illness.
- ④ There are excellent children's books available now for different age groups to help you explain things to them in a simple and understandable way. As the children get older they may become more curious and ask different questions about mental illness.
- ④ It's useful to give your children practical examples of how your illness can affect you when you are unwell so they understand that it is not your fault, or theirs; it's just one of those things we need to learn how to manage as best we can.
- ④ Never underestimate how much a child takes on board. Be careful what you say and do in front of them. Remember

that children may take comments literally or read deeper into something you say than you would want them to.

- ④ Children may have difficulty in expressing exactly what it is that they are feeling and as a result may ‘act out’ or behave differently to what they normally would. Talk with them as much as you can about what is happening for them. Involve them in family conversations. Listen to what they have to say.
- ④ Many children who have a parent with a mental illness have reported how frustrated, frightened and upset they feel when nobody tells them what is happening or listens to their experience. It is really important to talk about mental illness in an age appropriate way and there are many books and resources around that can help you. Include children in planning for the possibility that the parent may become unwell or go to hospital. Make sure they know what will happen to them – are they staying at granny’s house or maybe going to stay with a foster family. How will they stay in touch? Who will let them know what is happening or answer any questions?

Adolescence

“I feel like I'm the only kid whose mum has depression and I worry about her”.

Joseph, 14

We think we can safely say that the teenage years are a time of great intensity – school, friendships, work, first love, moving towards independence, identity, sexual development, peer pressure and all those other things that go with adolescence.

Developmentally, adolescence is the ‘grey area’ between childhood and adulthood – physically, cognitively and emotionally. Young people of this age are striving for

independence and will question and criticise their parents more often, regardless of whether the parent has mental illness or not.

Some young people who have a parent with a mental illness will take on a more significant caring role as they get older. This may be at the expense of achieving well at school, spending time with friends or being involved in sport or interest groups. They may be at risk of low self esteem, social isolation, emotional disturbances, poor coping strategies (including self harm, aggression or drug / alcohol use) and even mental health issues themselves.

Most of us can remember some time in our growing up that was really quite difficult for us. Be aware of your own reactions as your children approach this age and stage. It's the bits that we had trouble with ourselves that we are likely to be a bit lost about when thinking about how to help our own children.

So what can you do to support the adolescent in your family?

- ④ Take really good care of yourself. Any events or issues that raise your own anxiety or stress may leave you more reactive to your teenager.
- ④ Talk with your partner about the issues, seek information and advice, read books, maybe do a parenting teenagers course. They are often one-day sessions that happen from time to time in most areas.
- ④ Make sure they are not taking on too much responsibility. Although it is important that teenagers learn about housekeeping and do chores, it is not appropriate that they are running the family household, looking after younger siblings and doing most of the work – especially if it means that they are missing school or do not have time to do homework or spend time with their friends.
- ④ Support the adolescent to have balance in their life. This includes school, social, sport and family life.

- ④ Having a trusted adult with whom the young person can discuss sensitive issues, get advice and who will support or advocate for them can really help. This person may be a family member, a family friend or a professional.
- ④ It is really important that the young person contributes to and is part of any care or crisis plans that are developed. Their role in supporting the parent with the mental illness needs to be acknowledged and valued by other family members as well as any health professionals that may be involved.
- ④ If the young person has any mental health concerns or is struggling to cope, it can be beneficial to seek some professional support, maybe a youth worker, a GP, or the school psychologist.

“It’s not like you talk to your friends about mental illness. I’m not about to tell my friends my mum has one”.

Bonnie, 16

Your Children’s Needs

This space is for you to write ideas or thoughts you may have about what you can do or say to help your child/ren and what opportunities or assistance they need.

‘Can I Catch It?’ - Children, Young People and Understanding Mental Illness

We have already talked about how having parental mental illness can affect children at different stages of their development. This section is about some of the questions children may have about their family’s experience of mental illness.

What is mental illness?

Kids will almost definitely want to know what mental illness is. What is bipolar? My mummy has depression – what does that mean? Can you tell me about schizophrenia?

Try and explain in language that the child understands – don’t use long winded words or medical jargon. Explain that many people experience mental illness. Talk about the symptoms that affect their parent and what the parent can do to help manage them. There are many great websites and books about mental illness that have been specifically designed for kids – encourage your child to read and to ask questions so that you know they have understood. Remember some kids might be happy knowing just a little bit and then leaving it until they are older before finding out more information.

Will mum / dad get better?

When talking about recovery with children it is important to let them know that mental illness is treatable, that symptoms do get better over time and that people can learn to manage them. If relapse happens then that too can be treated. There are a number of treatment options for mental illness. Keep your children informed as much as possible about what is happening; mummy needs to go to hospital for a while, dad needs to take some medicine every day and see a counsellor to talk about how he is feeling.

Will I get a mental illness?

Mental illness is not contagious like the flu so you can't just 'catch it'. And just because your mum or dad has a mental illness, it doesn't mean that you will. Reassure your kids that nobody ever knows whether they will experience a mental illness or not and that there are many things they can do to stay mentally healthy; for example, talk to someone if they are feeling stressed or worried, participate in fun things such as sport, clubs or interest groups, eat healthily, exercise.

“My mum told me she had a test before she had my twin and me and that it was not catching. So I was very shocked when I fell ill with mental illness. I always have concerns about my own children especially as they grew up with me, but a good education at school, good jobs, and good relationships with their friends and their friend's parents have stood them in good stead”.

Margaret

Was it something that I did that caused mum / dad to get sick?

When children don't understand why something bad has happened they tend to blame themselves – ‘*dad got depressed because I didn't tidy my room when he asked*’. Some of this self-blame can carry on throughout the childhood period and even into adulthood if not talked about adequately at the time. We cannot emphasise enough how important it is to talk about (and talk about again) how their parent's mental illness is not their fault.

If you can discuss the ways in which the mental illness affects everyone in the family, as a family, you are more likely to be able to work out how to help each other. We all usually feel much better when we know what we can do to help, and when we know we are not going to be expected to do things we are not well enough or old enough to manage on our own.

Is there anything I can do to help mum / dad get better?

Children want their family to be happy and are prepared to do what they can to help out when things aren't good. That is ok but it is important to explain that it is the job of adults such as doctors or mental health workers to take care of the parent with the illness, not the children. It is the children's task to be children; to play, go to school, and hang out with their friends. The children can provide love and support but are not responsible for the care of their parent.

"Its harder and you have to make a lot more adjustments. It can be very frustrating. I feel upset because I can't help her or fix it".

Elsie, 17

What can I do if I feel scared or if I am worried about mum / dad?

As part of planning for the possibility of the parent with the illness becoming unwell, make sure that the children are involved so that they know who they can phone and talk to. If the person with the illness is a lone parent, then they may have in the plan that the child can ring someone like granny or the mental health worker if they feel that things aren't right or think that the parent is becoming unwell.

"I feel sad that mum is sad"

Sam, 12

“Having a member of your family who has a mental illness does not really make you that much different from everyone else because we are all different anyway. It’s not about us being different; it’s about having more responsibilities. It means experiencing a different way of life”.

Elisha (18 years)

Being a Young Carer

Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, children and young people end up being the main support for a parent with a mental illness. For some young people, this is a positive and rewarding role, for others it is a struggle to balance all their commitments and may resent having to give up activities that their peers are getting involved in. Whatever the case, it is important that the young carer is supported by the people around them – family members, the parent’s mental health worker and psychiatrist, their school.

It is essential that the young person who is caring for their parent gets some time of their own to do the things they want to: to relax, spend time with friends, read, play sport, study. Sometimes they may need a longer break and have some time away from their parent by staying with a friend or family member and this may involve getting some respite care for the parent.

Young Carers and ARAFMI contacts are listed at the back of this booklet.

Having Resilience

Have you ever wondered why some people seem to bounce back from difficulties in life, while others get stuck and don't seem to recover? This ability to cope with challenges, to recuperate from traumatic events and to succeed despite the odds is called **resilience**. Resilience is a hard thing to pin down – sometimes we have it, sometimes we don't and it is not always clear why that is so.. What we do know is that there are things that adults, children and families can do to help build up their resilience so that when difficult situations arise, people have strengths that will help them pull through.

“I am lucky to have been creative and resourceful - gifts I have used well to live well despite living with a mother and having a mental illness myself. Having lived with my mother with mental illness it taught me to problem solve not because I had a choice but because I had to. This has been so useful to me and has helped me though many hard times”.

Margaret

So what can we do to build up our children's resilience? Research has shown that children who are able to develop healthy relationships, have good self esteem and are able to problem-solve and make decisions which provide them with a sense of control over their lives, have the qualities of resilience.

We can:

- ④ Support children to make friends who they can play with, talk to, be themselves.
- ④ Encourage, praise, and affirm all the good things that the child does. Celebrate achievements. Reflect together on things that didn't go so well and help the child to learn from experience.

- ④ Include the children in family decisions wherever possible. Talk about things that your family would like to do together and let all members of the family choose activities.
- ④ Acknowledge with the child that having a parent with a mental illness can sometimes be difficult. Provide age appropriate information so that the child has an understanding about what is happening to their parent.
- ④ A strong protective factor for children living with a parent with mental illness is having ongoing, supportive relationships with adults who are well, to help provide some consistency and perspective. This person could be their other parent, a teacher, family friend, counsellor, extended family or mentor. This person also supports the child in their relationship with the parent with the illness, as this too is really important.
- ④ Provide the child with age appropriate information and include them in decision making without burdening them unnecessarily with adult concerns.

But what about families? Families who can bounce back from life's challenges tend to have good relationships, self esteem and a sense of control. Signs that show a family is more likely to have resilience include family members behaving respectfully towards each other, making decisions together, having healthy relationships outside of the family, being able to negotiate with each other, being able to negotiate with other people including support services, and enjoying spending time with each other. Of course, there are many other factors too. What helps your family to have resilience?



(Adapted from 'Our Scrapbook of Strengths'⁴)

Onwards and Upwards.....

Mental illness provides challenges for any family. One of those challenges is to continue to bring up your children so that they are healthy, happy and thriving. We hope that this booklet has helped your family to understand some of the issues that your children may be experiencing.

Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect parent. You can only do your best. This booklet has been about giving you and your family some information and ideas about how mental illness can affect and be affected by parenting and some strategies to get through it all. Good luck!

⁴ Masman, K (2003) (ed), *Our Scrapbook of Strengths*, Family Action Centre and Innovative Resources, Bendigo

Children and Parenting Information

Australian Childhood Foundation	www.childhood.org.au
Department for Education and Training	www.det.wa.edu.au
Early Childhood Australia Inc	www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/supporting_best_practice/supporting_best_practice.html
Family Assistance Office	13 61 50 www.familyassist.gov.au
Kidsafe (Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Australia).	www.kidsafewa.com.au 1800 802 244
Grandcare Wanslea Family Services	1800 008 323 www.wanslea.asn.au
Meerilinga Young Children's Service	9489 4022 www.meerilinga.org.au
Ngala Family Resource Centre	9368 9368 1800 111 546
Office for Youth	www.childrenandyouth.wa.gov.au
Department for Communities	http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Resources/Parenting/
Parenting Line A telephone service for people caring for children 0-18 years.	6279 1200 1800 654 432
Playgroup WA	9228 8088 1300 733 544 www.playgroupwa.com.au
Relationships Australia Family Mediation Counselling and referral services assisting couples and families in distress.	9489 6363 1300 364 277
WA Perinatal Mental Health Unit	9340 1795 www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/health_professionals/WA_perinatal_mental_health_unit/contact.php & www.yourzone.com.au/index.html

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 and Carelink Centre	1800 052 052
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:



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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.