

# Family to Family








Telling It Like It Is . . . .

## Going to Hospital

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

“I feel angry when mum goes to hospital because I just want her to come back”.

*Andrew, 10*

Hospitals can be scary, unknown places at the best of times but especially when you need to visit someone you love who is sick or injured. Many people find psychiatric hospitals or wards even scarier, making friends and family even more reluctant to visit. This is largely because they are unfamiliar and many people have never visited one. They don't realise how much they have changed from the institutions of years ago.

Being the person actually staying in hospital due to mental illness is also pretty scary. We can feel very reluctant to go to hospital even though we know it's probably the best place for us. Sometimes the admission occurs suddenly and unexpectedly. At other times the admission may be planned due to the person having a change in medication or as part of an ongoing treatment strategy. Some people may rarely or never need to go to hospital whereas others are admitted regularly or for long periods of time. Whatever the case, we have found it helpful to talk within our families about the possibility of the parent with the mental illness going to hospital and having a plan so that all of us know what is going to happen. The plan can also be adapted should the other parent need to go away too.

This booklet draws on the wisdom of families where the parent with a mental illness has had to go to hospital. It has been written by those families in partnership with a group of people whose work includes supporting people with a mental illness, their family and their children.

## **Before Going to Hospital – Make a Plan**

Has your family thought about what needs to happen if the parent with the illness has to go to hospital for a few days or a few weeks? The ‘Supporting Our Family’ kit which is available online at [www.mental.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.mental.health.wa.gov.au) provides a structure to help you plan in case that happens. The Booklet in this series called, ‘Working Things Out as a Family’ also has additional information. Questions that you need to think about may include:

- ④ Where will the kids stay, if there is no-one at home who can look after them?
- ④ Can I take my baby with me to a specialist mother and baby unit?
- ④ Where will the kids go after school while the other parent is still at work?
- ④ Who will take them to sport practice on Saturday morning?
- ④ Does the person looking after my child know about their sleep routine?
- ④ What do I need to know about what will happen in hospital?
- ④ Who will help me keep in touch with my partner, children, family while I am in hospital?
- ④ Who do my family contact to see how I’m going?

Make sure everyone mentioned in the plan knows what their role is, including the children. Children may find the absence of their parent extremely distressing and may feel confused and unsure about what is happening. Reassure them that everything will be ok and that mum/dad is going to hospital to get better. Encourage them to ask questions and provide any relevant age appropriate material.

Also, work out how your family will know when things can go back to normal and the plan put away. For example, this may be when the parent returns from hospital or when they indicate they feel ready to take on some or all their usual responsibilities again.

## When you are the parent going to hospital

“I wish I knew then.... that I would still be alive now.....that I could actually be better off and happier after coming out the other end”.

*Anon*

Going into hospital can mean lots of different things for people depending on whether they believe they should be there or not, whether they have had an opportunity to plan before hand and whether they are confident that things are going well for their family at home.

It is okay to ask for help for yourself and your family while you are in hospital. It does not mean that you are not a good parent; in fact it shows you are taking care of your family. You may need to think about what kind of support you need; the clearer your request is, the easier it is for people to help. Speak with the hospital social worker as they are aware of many services and resources and are able to arrange these for you.

Look after yourself in hospital. Below is a list of items that you can take with you that we have found to be useful or which help make the place feel a bit more homely.

### *Things to take in to hospital*

- 📷 Photos of your children
- 📷 A favourite cuddly toy
- 📷 Some money for the phone
- 📷 Telephone numbers
- 📷 Your own pillow, if allowed.
- 📷 Reading glasses
- 📷 Writing paper and a pen

## **When you are the parent at home**

Do you feel like a cyclone has just hit your home and there is chaos everywhere? Maybe you feel an overwhelming sense of relief? Having a partner with a mental illness can turn your world upside down, especially when they go to hospital. You may feel that you are a lone parent and that all the responsibility has been placed on your shoulders. Or you may have a strong support network of people who are willing to help out when needed.

Whatever the case, make sure you are taking time to look after yourself. This may be getting in a babysitter so that you can continue to play in your footy or netball team, or seeking some counselling through a carer support agency. (see back pages)

## **When you are a single parent and have to go to hospital**

For some single-parent families, going to hospital feels like a logistical nightmare. Who will look after the kids, feed the dog, and pay the bills? Our best advice is to plan ahead, even if there is only a remote chance that you will ever need to spend time in hospital. That way, you can feel comfortable knowing that if you do need to go into hospital, plans are already in place.

Some single parents have extended family and close friends who they can rely on in times of need. Talk with them about looking after the children if you have to go into hospital. Discuss things such as routines, eating habits, allergies, sports commitments and all the things they need to know when caring for your children. Write this down if you can. Will the person come and stay at your place or will the kids stay with them? Do any financial arrangements need to be discussed? Are there any potential circumstances in which they will be unable to help (i.e. a planned holiday, work commitments)?

Sometimes it is not possible to have someone you trust on stand-by in case you ever need to go into hospital. It is important in this instance to have a discussion with your doctor, caseworker or other support person about planning for more formalised care. There are some organisations that can provide temporary

care for children in emergencies. It may help you to feel more comfortable with this option if you can discuss this with the organisation and have a plan about when and who you need to contact if you have a planned or unplanned admission. (see back pages)

“If you are a solo parent, going into hospital can be a very difficult time for you. Firstly who looks after the children? Who do you tell that you are the only person at home? I know from personal experience of many years that leaving my children at home on their own, sometimes for months, was not the best for them. This of course has not done much for our relationship. As a sole parent I would say to you talk to a person you trust or your treating team at your clinic, GP or whoever you see for your mental health and make a plan in advance. Include your children in the planning process. This shows that you are thinking ahead and taking responsibility for your family. Being a solo parent with a mental illness has many challenges but there are a few organisations around that run groups for solo mums with mental illness who are really supportive and who organise regular outings and camps with other mums and kids in situations like yours”.

*Anon*

## When children come to visit

“My mum was always coming in and out of hospitals and I was being moved around a lot. I didn’t mind moving. But going in and out of hospitals was a pain because I don’t like them and every time I saw her she seemed fine. Even though she seemed fine I knew she wasn’t and it was pretty frustrating.”

*Elisha*

Having your kids visit while you are in hospital can be fantastic, especially if you haven’t seen them for a while. It can boost your spirits, remind you of the good things in your life and provide the motivation to get better and get home again. It may also cause some stress, particularly if you feel worried or uncomfortable about having your children coming into a psychiatric ward.

“Remember to take some flowers, chocolates or a get well card when you go to visit. Not only does it make the person in hospital feel loved and wanted, it also helps to normalise the experience for everyone – after all, we always take gifts in to visit people who have a physical ailment in hospital”.

*Anon*

When speaking to your children about visiting you or the other parent in hospital, encourage them to ask questions and let them talk about how they are feeling. Try and stay calm, even if you feel quite anxious about it! The more worried you appear the more frightened or concerned they will be. If being in hospital is something you or your partner find difficult to talk about with your children then it may be helpful to have someone you trust to be there and help you. This could be a friend, a relative, or a mental health worker. Explain to your children what it may be like if they intend to visit the hospital. For example let them

know that people will be out of bed and wearing their normal clothes rather than pyjamas or how mum/dad or other patients may be behaving.

Encourage children to talk about their feelings. Children need to have someone listen to them. This is good for them and the only way we are able to understand what they are feeling, experiencing or concerned about.

“Having kids at home alone is really stressful and makes trying to concentrate on getting better all the more difficult. I had to fake most of my wellness just to get out of the hospital to get home to the kids. I did not have many visits from my kids - it was only when a friend could bring them in and I could tell they just did not want to be there. They would play havoc on the wheelchairs, going up in the lift and having races up and down the corridors or filling up the plastic cups with Milo and then leaving. Later the nurse would come to tell me about my kids taking all the Milo and causing havoc around the hospital. So I found it very stressful and it was sometimes a month or so before I saw them again. They rarely phoned, only if there was a disaster happening, which I was powerless to do anything about. At no stage did I have any support from the hospital, friends or family. If only I had known then what I know now, it need not have been so hard for my kids and me”.

*Anon*

Something else you can do is to find out from the ward whether they have anything in place for when children visit. If the unit does not have provisions for children then take some toys or books from home to play with. Or for the parent in hospital, you could think about making something for your children in any craft groups you may attend whilst you are an inpatient. Ask if the Occupational Therapist can help you or even run a session

on making something for your children to play with. This can be fun for you and your children will feel happy that you have made something for them when they visit. They will also know you've been thinking of them and care about them. Some units are happy to let pets visit too!

When kids come to the ward, they are sometimes exposed to conversations between staff and/or other patients that are not appropriate for them to be hearing. If you do not want your kids to hear what staff are discussing, let staff know. There may be a room or other quiet place away from those conversations that you can take your children. Ask to have it written up in your notes so all staff who come on duty know what the needs for your family are. If your children do hear things they probably shouldn't, try and talk about it with them to provide some age appropriate information or put the words in context.

Always ask if you don't know or are unsure of something. You may find it helpful to ask your service provider if they can link you up with someone in a similar situation (sometimes called a peer support person or mentor). Not all hospitals will have these programs in place as they are just beginning to be established. However the more people ask for this type of support, the more motivation there is to start them.

“If you can, check out everyone’s feelings and most of all talk as openly as you can with your children. Children feel safer knowing what is happening to their parent and themselves”.

*Anon*

When a parent goes into hospital, especially for a long time it may be useful to let certain people know, especially if you are a single mum/dad. These may include:

- ④ Your children’s school (teacher / chaplain / school psychologist/school nurse).
- ④ Trusted family members.
- ④ Neighbours or friends who can be available if your children need something.

- 🗣️ Church, synagogue, mosque or temple if you attend one.
- 🗣️ Community groups or clubs you belong to. They will be worried about you.

You can ask the social worker to let the school or other people know on your behalf if you do not want to do this yourself. There is a letter in the ‘Supporting Our Family Kit’ that can help you think about what to say. It is important to let the children know who is being told and what they are being told so they know who they can talk with.

“I found that it was helpful for me to let the chaplain know at my children’s school, and gave him permission to let the relevant staff know of my hospitalisation. This helped my children to feel connected to someone during the times when they were at home alone. I was relieved to know that they were being cared for spiritually and emotionally where they spent most of their time, at school”.

*Anon*

## Including Family in Discharge and Treatment Planning

While you are in hospital, keep asking questions! It is your right to do so. For example you can ask:

- ④ Have you kept a record in my notes that I am a parent and have you referred to my children, who is caring for them, how they are doing, who to contact and any other relevant information?
- ④ Can we have a family meeting in which the people who support me outside of hospital can attend? Things to be discussed could include planning for when I am out of hospital, making sure my family understand what is going on for me, working out whether we will need some additional practical or emotional support and talking about possible support services that may be able to assist if we do.
- ④ Can we have a joint meeting with all the services involved with my family so that everyone is on the same page and understands our specific issues and concerns?
- ④ What about a care plan? We need to create or update a plan which describes how I am / my family is to be supported once I have been discharged.
- ④ Include the kids – make sure that they are part of the planning process and they have an opportunity to ask questions and receive information from doctors or other mental health staff treating the parent.
- ④ If this has been a difficult time it may be helpful to ask for services that can support the whole family to recover.
- ④ You may need practical assistance with housework, shopping, cooking, childcare. There are services that can assist – ask about them.

As a patient, you have the right to say that you would like another person such as your partner, family member or close friend to attend your appointment with you. We have found that it makes life easier for everyone if your family understands your symptoms and has opportunities to ask questions, as they too will be living with the day-to-day challenges of your illness. You and your doctor may decide to have family meetings



## Coming home from hospital...

“Being together again, this called for understanding and patience for everyone. I also felt a bit lost and that I was not needed any more. This was just a feeling”.

*Anon*

While you've been away, your partner and children have had to manage without you. Coming home is going to require a re-adjustment for them as well as you. Try to be patient and gentle – remember you're not the only one who has to get used to things being different. It will take time for everyone to get used to each other again, and to figure out a household routine that works for the whole family. Take it easy; remember you are all still recovering from the experience!

## Things to tell your children before you come home...

- ④ Things won't go “back to normal” straight away. It will take some time for things to feel the same.
- ④ Mum / Dad may feel guilty about being away from you. Tell them you love them.
- ④ Don't forget to play! (And involve mum / dad if you like).
- ④ Mum / Dad are probably still not completely well and need to re-adjust too.
- ④ Talk together about how to help each other. Include extended family, friends, neighbours and/or the school if you can.
- ④ Children can be confused and worried about their absent parent; take time to listen to them.

There may be a lot of emotion when the parent comes home and everyone may feel a bit on edge. Children may say things like; will things be the same, is mum/dad better, what can I do to make things better? There may be some feelings of anger or resentment – “I’ve had to do everything while you were away.” “Dad missed seeing me win the race on Sports Day.”

Sometimes children take on extra responsibilities when you are away. Even though they may not always enjoy them they can gain a sense of value. Discuss how things will change and why.

Talk about these feelings as a family if you can.

Arthur’s tips for partners and older children:

- ④ To make home coming as peaceful as possible, make the house as clean and tidy as you can. Buy some groceries and/or have a single meal ready. A gift or flowers would be nice. Any cards (get well, welcome home, birthday, anniversary) could be displayed. A new DVD may be ready to play.
- ④ Encourage mum or dad to take care of themselves, to get out of bed and do something each day, and not give in to sleepiness that comes from the medication.

*Arthur*

## **In conclusion**

We hope that this booklet has given you some ideas about how to plan in case the parent with a mental illness has to go to hospital. In our experience, we have found that if we can talk about going to hospital before it all happens, then everyone in the family feels that things are more in control and they know what they need to do.

## Staying Happy, Healthy and Well Checklist

This checklist may help you and your family work out which areas you may need to focus on.

	When things aren't going to plan What are the signs?	What We'll Do
<b>Hospital</b> Before going to hospital When children come to visit Discharge Plan Treatment Plan Coming home of hospital		
<b>Mental illness management</b> Recovery plans Wellness Recovery Action Plan Case Coordination Plan Discharge Plan		
<b>When we're under pressure</b> High risk situations Crisis Situations Survival plans Kids - Safety Plan, Emergency 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 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 <a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>
Mens Line	1300 789 978 <a href="http://www.menslineaus.org.au">www.menslineaus.org.au</a>
Parenting Line	1800 654 432

### ***Want Some More Information?***

Children of Parents with Mental Illness Resource Centre	<a href="http://www.copmi.net.au">www.copmi.net.au</a>
Office of Mental Health	<a href="http://www.mental.health.wa.gov.au">www.mental.health.wa.gov.au</a> 9222 4099
SANE	<a href="http://www.sane.org.au">www.sane.org.au</a> 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 <a href="http://www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm">www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm</a>	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.