

## Talking to Children and Young People

### ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

*Information for parents, guardians and family members*

Most children worry less about something if they understand it. Providing children with opportunities to talk with their parent or other trusted adults about their parents' behaviours may help reduce their worries. If they don't understand or have things explained to them, they may make up for gaps in knowledge that may in fact be wrong. Children often express great relief at knowing that their parent is safe, receiving treatment, or that it is not their fault that their parent became unwell. All parents at some time in their parenting life will come across issues that are challenging to talk about with children. Many of the issues that used to be 'taboo' and difficult to discuss with children such as sexuality and drugs are more open subjects and less confusing as a result of community education. However mental health and in particular mental ill-health are issues that are poorly understood by most people. This means that the stigma of mental illness can prevent people talking about it, its affect on families and the person with the illness and how to seek help when needed.

Many parents who are living with mental illness worry about the effect this may have on their families and on their children. They may think that if they talk openly about their illness and how it makes them feel, that their children will be frightened, confused, embarrassed, or wouldn't understand anyway. Sometimes families decide to keep the illness a secret even from close family members such as grandparents. "I used to think that it was my fault but now I'm older and I know that it's not my fault"

It can be hard to find the right words to use to explain mental illness to children. Adults often find it difficult to talk to other adults about how they feel! Parents may not feel comfortable discussing this with their children. Be encouraged by knowing that children are better off with accurate, age appropriate information and this is almost always best coming from their parent/s or other significant adults from their family/friend network.

If children ask questions about their mum's or dad's mental health this usually means they want answers and is a good window of opportunity.

- Choose a space and a time which is comfortable for children and the adults involved, preferably where you will not be disturbed.

- Involve family members wherever possible and be clear about the purpose and scope of the discussion. Be realistic about what can be achieved.
- Check out with children what they think and what they already know. They may have a considerable amount of information and it is important for adults to know this and perhaps understand how they came to learn this. Sometimes parents do not feel their children worry because they do not ask any questions. It is important not to assume that being quiet means they understand. Talking to children about what they understand is happening and what they have noticed about how their parent is behaving is an important first step. It can also dispel any myth they may have that it should not be talked about.
- Reassure. Children may feel awkward when they talk about these kinds of things. They particularly may be reluctant to express sadness or anger to the parent who is unwell for fear of causing worry or concern. Children are also intensely loyal. It is important they children are told that adults understand they may be feeling awkward or worried and that they may not feel like talking much.

Listen carefully! Don't try to 'interpret' what they are asking or have experienced, but ask questions to check you have understood properly what they have said or told you.

- Ask 'open' questions. More discussion may occur when you ask questions or make statements that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Encourage children to put things in their own words.

Be yourself. Use a clear simple manner and avoid using tones that imply pity or could sound patronising. Don't use jargon!

Have paper, coloured pencils, modelling clay or playdough, at the ready!

"I can be more confident around other people about my mum now I know what's wrong"

- Use other examples. Explaining mental illness to children using an example like asthma can be very helpful. Asthma is generally well recognised by children; most have a friend who has asthma attacks. It can occur 'out of the blue' and can be frightening for the onlooker if the attack is severe. It requires immediate treatment, medication and sometimes hospitalisation. The cause of asthma, like mental illness,

is unknown but it is good to know what the triggers are and how to try to prevent attacks.

Another approach is use a specific example or comparison. The following is a guide using a car engine.

The brain has lots of different parts that do different things. They all need to work together for us to eat, sleep, talk, walk, feel, and so on. It is a very complicated part of the body, so complicated in fact that scientists are still trying to understand what makes it work and what to do when it doesn't.

Everyone's brain is unique and special, just as cars have different and special kinds of engines.

One reason why it can be hard to understand the brain is that we can't see inside it to figure it out. If you look inside the bonnet of a car you can see the engine. This is also very complicated. It has bits that go round and about, up and down, water and oil to keep the parts moving, plugs and so on. If just one bit stops working correctly, the car starts to 'behave' differently. It may shudder, it may not start at all, it may blow smoke, it may make strange noises. It can happen out of the blue and may be a real hassle for the family. And it may need to be fixed by a special person, a mechanic.

In a similar way, a person's brain may not work properly sometimes and needs extra help to work, not by a mechanic, but by a doctor – a psychiatrist – and with medication, not oil or new parts. You may notice this is happening because my/your mum or dad's behaviour may change. I/your mum or dad may seem extra angry or extra sad; I/they may be staying in bed a lot and not be able to do the things they normally do. I/they may say or do things that seem strange to you. But I am still your mum/dad.

Just as the car may need to go to the garage to be fixed, I/your mum or dad may need to go to hospital to get special help to get better and come home again. The people there have special training so they know the best way to help me/your mum or dad.

Cars need to be looked after so that maybe they won't get sick. People need to look after themselves too and this may mean taking medication, getting enough rest and breaks, talking about how they feel to others. Sometimes finding the right kind of



medication can take a while and everyone needs to be patient! All these things will help cars to keep starting and people with mental illness to stay well.

This type of explanation can easily be adapted for all ages and can be shortened or extended. Other ways to approach talking to children include using drawings or puppets. Check out the website [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au) for more resources.

Children understand things differently at different ages. Keep in mind the words and examples you chose and use your own unique understanding of your child to guide you.

Use other trusted adults to help you. Grandparents, other family members or good friends may be important sources of support for your child. They may also be able to help you explain your experiences of mental illness to your child. Your child's school teacher or an identified person at school may be able to sensitively provide you and your child with support.

If you are concerned about your child, your case manager or key worker can advise you of any programs or services in your area that may be able to provide you with assistance for you or your children.