



Communicating with your toddler or young child when you have a mental illness

A toddler or young child can pick up on even subtle changes in mood and behaviour when their parent is unwell.

This resource will help you to connect with your toddler or young child when you are unwell so they feel secure and nurtured. It steps you through:

- understanding your symptoms and behaviours
- thinking about what your toddler or young child notices and experiences
- communicating with your toddler or young child to support a nurturing connection.

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your toddler or young child views what is happening. It may be useful to talk with your health professional or another trusted support person about the impact of your mental illness on your role as a parent.

Understanding your symptoms and behaviours

By understanding your mental illness, you will be more familiar with how it affects your emotions, behaviours and moods. Emotions, behaviours and moods affect how you view yourself and how others view you. They also affect your relationships, including with your child.

When you are unwell, it is important to be aware of how your symptoms can influence your behaviour, facial expressions and tone of voice. These are the changes that will be noticed by your toddler or young child.

The first important step is to reflect on the symptoms you experience and the behaviours your child sees and hears. Then consider how your symptoms and behaviours could affect the way your toddler or young child feels. It can be helpful to do this activity with a partner, friend or your health professional. You can also do the activity on your own.



I guess I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong."

Sophie, NSW parent

A reflective exercise

Do not do this activity if you are feeling unwell.

Think about the symptoms you experience and the behaviours others may notice. Mark the symptoms and behaviours in the list below.

- | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking and moving slowly | <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling to concentrate | <input type="checkbox"/> Very tired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying a lot | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or hearing things | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping a lot |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicious thoughts | <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritable, short-tempered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic flashbacks | <input type="checkbox"/> Not mixing with others | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry outbursts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad or teary | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over-sensitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harm | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling numb | |

Are there any others? List these below.

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Write five of the symptoms or behaviours that worry you the most at the top of the circles below. Focus on those that impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your toddler or young child might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.

		
		

Understanding what your toddler or young child notices and experiences

Although a toddler or young child may still be developing their understanding of what you say, they will be very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and to the tone of your voice. Toddlers and young children are very perceptive and can detect even the smallest change in their parents' behaviour and body language (despite a parent trying to 'hide' any change).

You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions, your child's responses may also change. Your child may be reacting to behaviours or situations they do not understand. They may need help to manage and name their feelings.

Thinking about the symptoms and behaviours you previously listed:

- what might your toddler or young child see in your face?
- what might they hear in the tone of your voice?
- how might they have made sense of this?
- which of your behaviours might worry your toddler or young child?
- what have you noticed about their reaction?

Communicating with your toddler or young child to support a nurturing connection

Quick tips for communicating and connecting with your toddler or young child:

- Let your child know using simple language that you are not well and it is not their job to worry as you are taking steps to get better.
- If you are not feeling well and your child is distressed, try to manage your own feelings first before trying to comfort them. Use a calm voice, gentle facial expressions and slowly lower your body to be with them.
- Sit quietly and have a cuddle, read a story or sing a song. If you do not have the energy to sing, listen to music together or just snuggle.
- Start to link words to feelings. If you are feeling irritable, reassure your child by saying *"Mummy/Daddy is grumpy/angry right now. You are not making me grumpy/angry. It is just how I am feeling and I can see that this is making you sad."*

You might start a conversation about your mental illness with:

"I know I used my angry voice. I want you to know I am not angry with you. I can see it makes you sad/frightened when I use my angry voice. I will try to use my quiet voice when I am talking to you."

or

"Mummy/Daddy is unwell and that is why they are tired and sleep a lot. I do not like feeling this way, but I do like to spend time with you. Can we do something quietly together?"

Tips to remember

- Toddlers and young children communicate feelings, frustration and their need for attention with their behaviour.
- Toddlers and young children need to trust that you can respond to their needs in a calm and positive way.
- Encourage your toddler or young child to use words to express their feelings. For example, *"I can see you are looking sad. Are you feeling sad?"* or *"I can hear you using your angry voice. Are you feeling cross/frustrated?"*
- Spend time with your child each day. Plan ahead if you know you will not have a lot of energy. Tell stories, read a book, listen to children's music or play in the sand.
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Small conversations can build on your child's and your family's shared understanding over time.
- Your child needs to know that they have not caused you to be unwell, it is not their fault and that you are taking steps to get well.

Other trusted adults can be helpful when explaining your mental illness to your child. Consider grandparents, other family members or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Tell them about the information you have given to your child and the information that you would like them to share with your child. You can also tell them if there is any information that you do not want to be shared with your child.