



Talking with primary school age children about parental mental illness

Most parents wonder about how they should talk to their child about mental illness

This resource will help you to prepare for conversations with your child about your mental illness so you can help them to have a better understanding of what is happening. It steps you through:

- understanding your symptoms and behaviours.
- thinking about what your child notices and experiences.
- preparing to talk with your child.

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

Understanding your symptoms and behaviours

When you understand your mental illness, you will be more familiar with how it affects your emotions, behaviours and moods. This will help you to develop an understanding of the impact of mental illness on you and your child.

Emotions, behaviours and moods affect how you view yourself and how others view you. They also affect your relationships with others, including with your child. An important first step in preparing to talk with your child about mental illness is to reflect on the symptoms and behaviours your child sees and hears and how these affect how your child feels.

Start with the reflective exercise on the next page.

Conversations with your child about mental illness can help them to make sense of their experience. If you are trying to make sense of your illness, or need to talk about your experiences, discuss this with either an adult that you trust, a health professional or a peer worker. Do not expect your child to help you understand your illness.

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I think it's best coming from us. I'd got to a point where I had accepted my diagnosis, I was getting some treatment, and I knew enough about it to explain it to them in an age-appropriate way."

Ben, VIC parent

A reflective exercise

Do not do this activity if you are unwell today

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

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <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 child might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.

<p><i>Symptom or behaviour:</i></p> <p><i>What does my child see, hear and feel?</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><i>Symptom or behaviour:</i></p> <p><i>What does my child see, hear and feel?</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><i>Symptom or behaviour:</i></p> <p><i>What does my child see, hear and feel?</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p><i>Symptom or behaviour:</i></p> <p><i>What does my child see, hear and feel?</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p><i>Symptom or behaviour:</i></p> <p><i>What does my child see, hear and feel?</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	

Understanding what your child notices and experiences

Children at different ages will notice and react differently to your behaviours and emotions. Primary school age children are very perceptive and pick up on even the smallest changes in their parent’s behaviours and body language (despite a parent’s attempts to ‘hide’ them).

Children tend to believe they are somehow at fault for their parent’s behaviour, and can feel responsible for making their parent better.

Thinking about the symptoms and behaviours you listed:

- how might they have made sense of these?
- what have you noticed about their reaction to them?
- what do you think they might be feeling?
- what might they understand in the language you use?
- which of your behaviours do you think might worry your child the most?

Preparing to talk with your child

Conversations with your child about your mental illness are important. These conversations can help your child to understand the family situation and to make sense of what they are experiencing. When your child does not understand what is happening in the family they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand the situation. They may feel personally responsible and worry about you and your health and safety.

Helping your child to understand mental illness and what it means for your family will:

- help your child to know that it is okay to talk about mental illness.
- allow your child to ask questions and get the correct information.
- help them come to you (or others) when they are worried or feeling overwhelmed.
- build an understanding that can strengthen relationships.



Starting the conversation with your child

You might start a conversation about your mental illness, with:

- *“You may have been worried about..... or noticed.....”*

(Use the symptoms and behaviours list to get started.)

- *“I want you to know I have a mental illness. You have not caused this. It is not your fault.”*

You might invite your child to talk about what they have noticed or are worried about:

- *“What have you noticed that worries you?”*

You can then follow with:

- *“I am here to talk to if you have any questions or are worried.”*
- *“If you feel you can’t come to me, you can talk to.....”*

An example of how you could start the conversation:

‘You might have noticed I do not seem to have much energy and I am always tired. Being tired is a symptom of my mental illness. I want you to know you have not caused this and it is not your fault. I don’t like feeling like this and it must be hard for you to understand when you see me tired and sleeping a lot.’

Write your own starting script here:

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.....

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Tips to remember

- Talk to your child at their level using words they will understand.
- Stop and pause after each new bit of information.
- Give your child time to think and to ask questions (the questions might not come straight away, your child may need thinking time).
- If you do not know the answer to a question tell them that you will find out, or even find out the information together.
- One discussion is never enough. A shared understanding takes time and your child's questions and need for information will change as they grow.
- Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. Set up a process so that if you are too unwell or do not have the energy to answer questions, they still feel valued and know that you will make time for it later.
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you can't answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust (e.g. a family member, a family friend or a health professional).
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Often the first discussion is the most daunting. Small conversations can build on your child's and your family's shared understanding over time.

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.

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I didn't know...that some kids really do think they are responsible for their mum or dad's mental illness. I've since gone back and reassured them that none of this is their fault and they are not responsible for my moods or behaviours... I'm responsible for all of those things."

Julie, SA parent

Resources

A range of free resources that you can use to help your child understand mental illness are available at the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) website: www.copmi.net.au

There are many ways to get help and information on looking after your mental health and ways to share this information with your family. If you need support, ask your doctor or mental health professional for guidance.