



TALKING ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS WITH TODDLERS

For parents with kids in mind...

Whether it's you or your partner who's well, unwell or becoming well, how you communicate with your toddler is really important. Small children can pick up on and react to situations you might not notice.

Be prepared

When you and your partner understand the illness you'll be more comfortable interacting with your child. You can research the illness yourself or ask your health professional for information.

There's a lot of information about mental illness, the types of support and treatments available on the internet. SANE Australia and beyondblue have credible information on their websites.

Perhaps you prefer discussing the illness with a GP or mental health professional to ask questions and speak about your own experiences. Keep in mind it can take time finding a professional you're comfortable with and has the right fit for you.

When you understand the illness, you'll be more familiar with how it affects emotions, behaviours or moods. This will help you and your partner develop your own way of communicating that is comfortable for you and your child.

Toddlers pick up on cues

Small children take cues from their parent's facial expressions and tone of voice. They are also starting to link feelings with words like 'sad', 'sleepy', 'cranky' etc. From these cues, they'll make choices and try understanding what they are experiencing.

Toddlers signals and behaviours can be easily mis-read if they are trying to please you or are acting in a way that's distressing. In fact, this is when they may be reacting to behaviours or situations they don't understand and need help to manage their feelings.

Toddlers notice obvious changes in their parents behaviour, like from happy to irritable, and often feel responsible for them. When you or your partner aren't well, it's important you're aware of your behaviour around your child. It will help if you let them know in simple language that you're not well and it's not their job to worry because you're taking steps to get better..

Use simple language

Toddlers start to enjoy and understand stories based on things happening around them. They are starting to link words with feelings and will understand mum or dad "have sad sickness" and mum or dad is "seeing the doctor to get help". To help children feel

safe and comfortable with discussions, try putting information about particular experiences in a story format or read them books about families where a parent is struggling.

Practical tips

- Tell your child when you or your partner's not well eg "daddy has the sad sickness but he's seeing the doctor who's helping him to get better".
- If you are feeling irritable, reassure your child by saying something like "Mummy/Daddy is angry right now, but it has nothing to do with you".
- When you talk about your illness or how you are feeling, use a calm voice and a gentle facial expression.
- If you are not feeling well and your child is distressed, try managing your own feelings before trying to offer them comfort.
- If you are finding it difficult coping with your child's needs, try finding someone you trust to be with them while you take a break. You might need to relax, call the Parent Helpline (check your directory for one in your state), or do something else you know works for you.
- If you have to leave your child, it can be distressing for them so reassure them by telling them "mum isn't feeling well and is going to get some help, but will be back tomorrow".
- If you are feeling a strain in the relationship with your child or find it hard feeling love for them, speak to a health worker. In this situation, it's important you persist to get the support you need. Your relationship with your child can improve.

Looking after yourself

Looking after yourself and seeking help when needed is important for you and your baby. When you look after yourself, you're able to be a good parent and role model — as your child grows they'll learn to take care of their own mental and physical health too.



Talk to someone | Get more info

Lifeline | 13 11 14 1 Kids Helpline | 1800 551 800

beyondblue | 1300 22 4636 | www.beyondblue.org.au

SANE Australia | 1800 18 SANE (7263) | www.sane.org