Did you know that lots of young people (at least one in four) live in families where Mum or Dad has a mental illness? Chances are that one of your friends has a family member with a mental illness but hasn’t said anything about it.

If your parent has a mental health problem you may be wondering what support is out there for you. You might need more information about mental illness or want to know where you can get some practical help or counselling. Sometimes people feel awkward or nervous about asking for help, but it’s worth it if it means less stress for you and your family.

Want to find out more about mental illness?

There’s some great information online. Websites like COPMI, Headspace, Youth beyondblue, ReachOut and SANE Australia are good places to start.

Sometimes it’s easier to use the school computers. If you’re worried that other people will see what you’re looking at, you could always tell them that you’re doing an assignment on mental health, or ask a teacher for some private time to search.

The school counsellor will also be able to help with information or you could ask your parent or a doctor for information.

Where do I go online?

www.copmi.net.au
www.headspace.org.au
www.reachout.com
www.sane.org
www.youthbeyondblue.com

Is it all too much?

Are you finding it hard because of what’s going on at home? Young people who have a parent with a mental illness sometimes do extra chores at home such as shopping, cleaning or cooking, helping out with younger siblings, helping take care of their parent and organising appointments or medication.

If you do a lot to help care for your parent you may be able to get extra help around the house from a carer organisation, mental health organisation or from your local council.

Family relationships can also be very stressful in families where a parent experiences mental health difficulties and you might sometimes find it hard to all get along with each other. There are lots of ways to ease the load but first you will need to tell someone about your situation.

“I was worried that if I told the school it would get me or my family into trouble. It’s been the opposite though. I’ve been able to get extensions on homework, and I don’t get told off anymore if I’m late because of Mum. They also linked us into some help for Mum through a local mental health organisation.”

Mark, age 16
Have you thought about talking to someone?

Other young people who have a parent with a mental illness have said that it really helped them to talk to someone who understands. Friends or family can be helpful but there’s no shame in asking for help from a professional counsellor or psychologist - that’s what they’re trained for and you can be confident they will respect your privacy.

A psychologist can give you a chance to talk about what’s happening in your family, give you ideas for how to relax, help you put together a Care Plan and listen without judgement. If you’re worried about your own mental health they can put your mind at rest or give you some ways to cope better at home. If you’re worried about your privacy ask about their confidentiality policy.

Which of these sound like you?

In the dark about what’s happening with your parent? Wondering what’s wrong? Worried it could be partly your fault?

Mum or Dad has a mental illness but they’re doing well at the moment.

Feeling like nobody else understands what it’s like to have a parent with a mental illness?

Scared that you might catch your parent’s mental illness?

Feeling stressed or sad most the time? Angry or anxious, not sleeping well or sleeping too much? Feeling very negative and wondering if you have the symptoms of mental illness too?

Doing a lot around the house or helping with your brothers and sisters plus your parent? It sometimes feels like you’re the adult!

Getting behind at school, no time to do your homework and finding it hard to concentrate or get enough sleep?

Mum or Dad is unwell, staying in bed a lot, doesn’t want to talk with you, or is doing things that are odd or scary?

Here are some things you could do to get help and feel more supported

You need information – if your parent is unwell, it’s never your fault. Try and talk with your parent or find another adult you can trust such as a family friend, sports coach or teacher. Tell your parent that you need to be included so that you understand what’s happening in your family. For some excellent information on mental illness visit www.sane.org

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You might decide to tell your friends how you’re feeling. Maybe they don’t have the same experiences but they can still listen and support you. If you’d rather talk to someone anonymous you could call Kids Helpline for free – Ph: 1800 551 800

You might like to get together with other young people with similar experiences. Other young people have said they felt less alone when they talked to someone else whose family is like theirs. For a list of organisations that run programs for ‘COPMI’ families visit www.copmi.net.au/get-help or find out about carer groups at www.youngcarers.net.au

Mental illness is not contagious so you can’t ‘catch it’, but having a parent with a mental illness might make you more vulnerable to mental health problems. Now is a good time to take care of yourself and be as well as possible. Take time to relax, do things you enjoy, eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep. Steer clear of drugs and alcohol as they can trigger mental illness, especially for people who have a family history of mental illness.

You need to talk to someone who can help you to feel better. This might be your parent, a teacher, a school counsellor or another trusted adult. You could also talk to your doctor, psychologist or visit your local Headspace centre. It’s always best to seek help early if you’re worried about your own mental health. Check out www.headspace.org.au or take a look at www.youthbeyondblue.org.au

Talk to your parent about how much you’re doing to help out. They might not realise you’re carrying such a heavy load. If you do have a role in caring for your parent, you may be eligible for young carer services including practical assistance and respite www.youngcarers.net.au. You may also be eligible for assistance from Centrelink www.humanservices.gov.au

It can be daunting to tell your school about your parent but there are lots of ways your school could help you if you let them, such as extensions on assignments or extra access to computers or learning materials. Your information will be kept private unless there are concerns for your safety.

If you’re worried or alone or if your Mum or Dad isn’t well enough to take care of you or your siblings, then you need to call an adult to come and help you. That could be your parent’s doctor, a relative or family friend. Follow your Care Plan if you have one - it may be appropriate to call your local Crisis Assessment Treatment Team. If you feel unsafe or are worried your parent might hurt themselves then call 000 straight away.

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