



Encouraging **your teenager** **to get help**

A guide for **parents** who have
a mental illness **and their partners**

A photograph of a man and a woman in a field of straw. The man is on the left, wearing a dark jacket over a white t-shirt, and is kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman is on the right, wearing a blue cardigan over a white scarf and a black top with a gold necklace. She has a slight smile and is looking towards the camera.

Growing up with a parent who has a mental illness - what do we know?

When researchers looked at children who have a parent with a mental illness they found that having appropriate support is important to the children's wellbeing and can reduce the likelihood that they will develop mental health issues themselves ⁽¹⁾.

Sometimes parents find it difficult to think about their child needing help because of their illness, however many parents who have a mental illness have told us that getting help for their child can be a positive step in their own recovery. Knowing that their teenager is being well supported can also help parents feel better about themselves and their illness and ensure that the whole family deals with things together.

1 Maybery, D.J., Reupert, A.E., Patrick, K., Goodyear, M., Crase, L., 2009, Prevalence of parental mental illness in Australian families, *Psychiatric Bulletin [P]*, vol 33, issue 1, Royal College of Psychiatrists, UK, pp. 22-26.

As a parent (or partner of someone) with a mental illness, you may have gained support and assistance from a range of service providers as well as from family and friends. It is likely that your teenager could use some extra help as well. You might be concerned they are developing their own mental health issue. You may have tried to get help for your teen but found they were reluctant. Maybe you have been turned away from a service in the past or found it hard to find the right help.

This fact sheet is aimed at helping you to assist your teenager to get help. You might also like to share the fact sheet 'My parent has a mental health problem. How can I get help?' with your child

What do we mean by **help-seeking**?

When we talk about help-seeking we don't just mean help for mental illness, we mean all kinds of support and assistance. This might include:

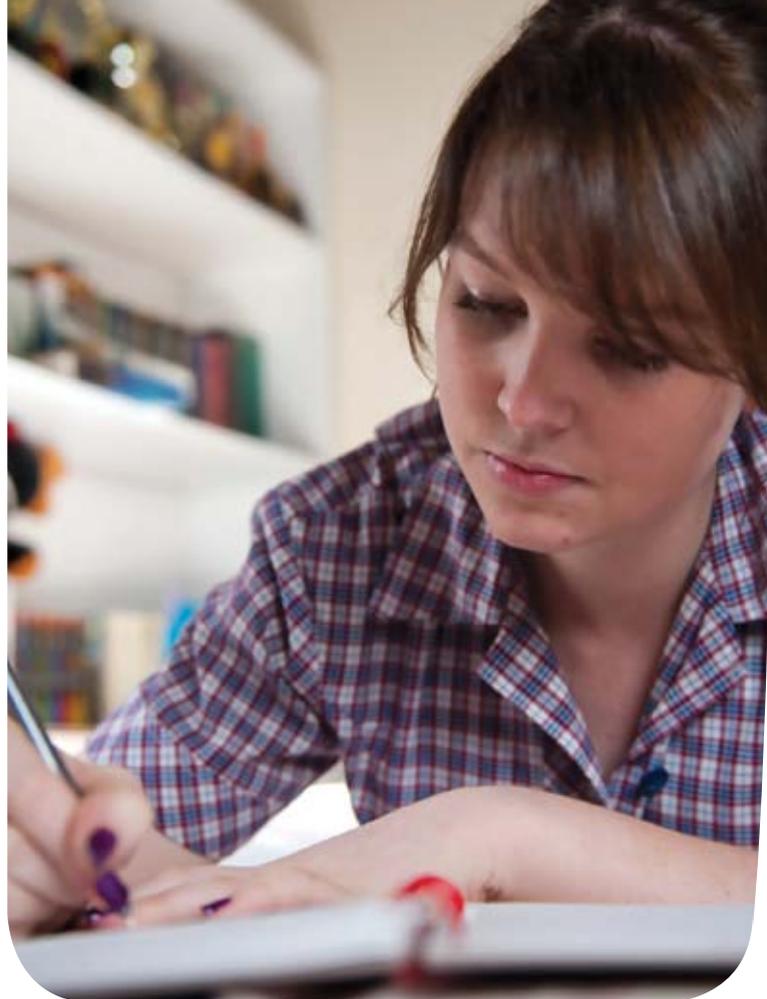
- Emotional support to develop coping skills and build resilience.
- Access to information about mental illness and the symptoms you (or your partner) experience.
- Practical help with household tasks, travel and other caring activities that the teenager might have taken on.
- Extra support at school.
- Help for your teenager's own mental health concerns.
- Support for challenging behaviour or family relationships.
- Assistance to take time out or access respite.

Help could come from family and friends or from professionals working in mental health, education or non-government organisations.

What could be stopping my teenager from **asking for help**?

Many young people who have a parent with a mental illness would like to talk to someone about their situation but they worry about the reaction from their friends, family or teachers. For instance, teenagers are often reluctant to be seen talking with the school counsellor in case they are thought of as different or their 'secret' becomes common knowledge. Asking for help may feel like an admission of weakness, failure or a betrayal of their 'family business'.

You may have your own worries about your teenager talking to others about your family's situation, especially if you have had negative experiences with services in the past. By sharing information with your teen's school, you have a right to know how it will be used and who it may be shared with. Information will only be passed on if the school has serious concerns about your child's safety or wellbeing. If so, appropriate support would be offered to the family.



It can really help young people to know there are many other families like theirs. They may like to join in educational or social activities for children of parents with a mental illness.

For a list of organisations that run 'COPMI' group activities visit www.copmi.net.au/support

A range of social, practical and financial supports are available to young people. If your teenager sometimes has a role in caring for you or takes on a greater share of household tasks than is typical for adolescents, then carers organisations, Centrelink, local councils and community mental health organisations may be able to assist, visit www.youngcarers.net.au

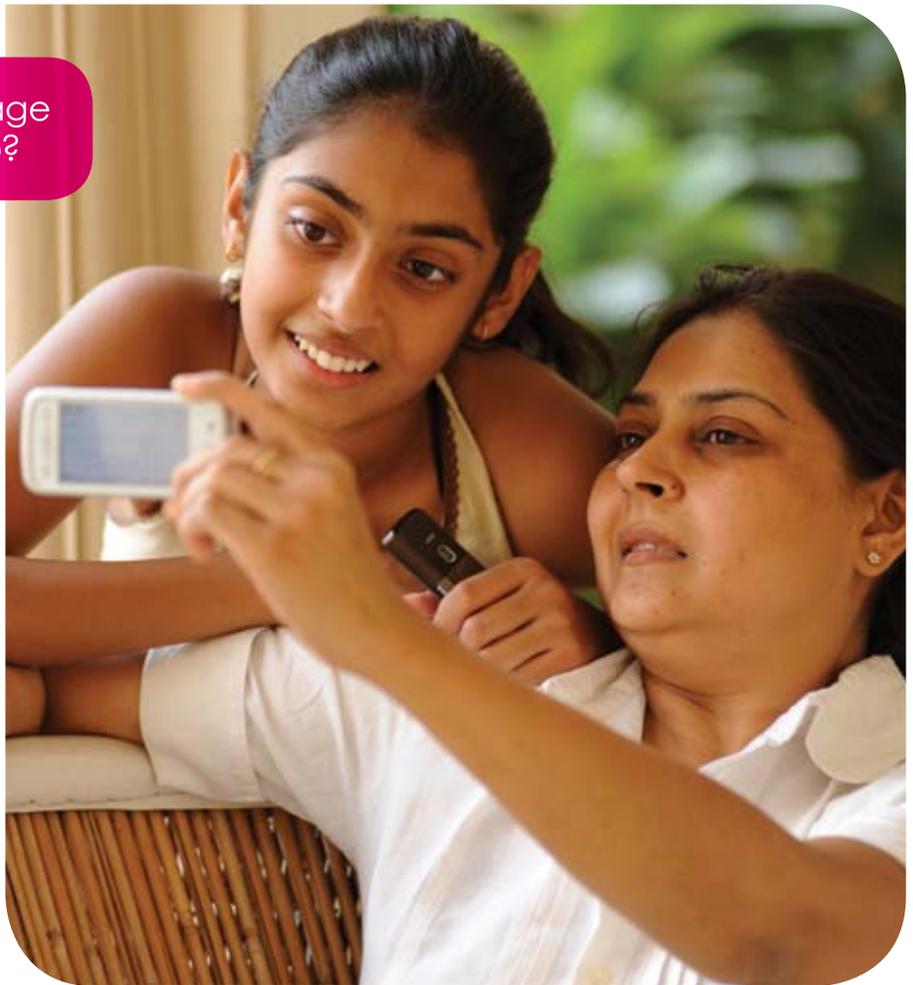
You may be concerned that you are seeing changes in your child. Symptoms to look out for include feeling stressed or sad all the time, feeling angry or anxious, not sleeping well or sleeping too much or changes in appetite, mood or behaviour. Early treatment is important and you can support your teenager to seek professional help. For more information visit www.youthbeyondblue.com

If, despite your efforts, your teenager rejects your encouragement to seek help, don't be discouraged. Continuing to create a home environment where you are open about mental illness and help-seeking, and providing ongoing opportunities for your child to talk to you and access more information if they want to, will mean the door is always open if they decide they need more support.

What can I do to encourage my teenager to seek help?

As a parent (or partner of someone) who has a mental illness, you may have times when you feel hesitant or unwilling to ask for help. This might be because you are unsure of what help is available, worried about the response you may receive or the avoidance may be a symptom of your distress. Sometimes the feeling of wanting to withdraw and reject assistance for yourself can spill over into refusing help for your child and discouraging help-seeking by your child. In contrast, trying to show an example of active and appropriate help-seeking yourself (even if you don't feel like it) will motivate and encourage your child to do the same. You can feel reassured that if your teenager needs help, it is not a negative reflection on you or your parenting. Accepting help is a positive life skill. There are many things you can do to prompt your teen to seek and accept help including:

- Providing access to online information about mental illness or giving your child age-appropriate printed information e.g. COPMI fact sheet for teens on help-seeking at - www.copmi.net.au or visiting - www.headspace.org.au - www.youthbeyondblue.com - www.reachout.com
- Talking about your own help-seeking in positive terms and describing it as a strong and courageous action. Telling your teenager how you have benefited from accepting help and letting them know it's okay if they need help too.
- Creating opportunities for your child to talk with trusted friends or family. Talk together about which family members or friends can be relied on for non-judgemental and confidential support.
- Your teenager might benefit from talking with a professional, such as a counsellor or psychologist. Offer to go with them or to make an appointment for them. You may need to gently prompt them a few times before they are ready to take this step in getting help.



- If they are very resistant to accepting help, ask them to talk about their concerns and explore solutions together. If you or your child have had negative experiences when you've accessed services in the past then talk about this with them. Acknowledge that you may need to be persistent to find a service that is a good fit for you and your family.
- Accepting professional help can feel intimidating, especially if a young person isn't exactly sure what happens at an appointment with a counsellor, psychiatrist or other health professional. You can reduce some of your child's anxiety by describing your experiences or inviting them to attend some appointments with you or your partner, if appropriate.
- Find out whether professionals who work with you can take a family approach by working together with you and your children.
- Be open and honest about mental illness in your family. Acknowledge the stigma that is often attached to mental illness and invite your teen to talk about any stigma they have encountered.
- Consider telling your child's school about your illness so that they can provide support and encourage help-seeking. More information on talking to your school is available at www.copmi.net.au/talking-to-school
- Prepare a Care Plan that sets out what should happen if Mum or Dad become unwell. Do this together with your child when you (or your partner) are well so that everyone knows exactly what to do and who to call. Emphasise that if they ever feel scared or alone they can call the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800. If they are in danger or if it is an emergency they should call 000 straight away. COPMI has a Care Plan template you can use at www.copmi.net.au/careplans

