



## TALKING ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS WITH TEENAGERS

*For parents with kids in mind...*



### Be informed

There are many good websites with information on mental illness signs and symptoms.

[www.sane.org.au](http://www.sane.org.au)

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### Websites for kids

[www.copmi.net.au/youth](http://www.copmi.net.au/youth)

[www.kidshelpline.com](http://www.kidshelpline.com)

[www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)

[www.itsallright.com](http://www.itsallright.com)

Teenagers are discovering new choices, responsibilities, life experiences and relationships. Talking about your (or partner's) mental illness with your teenage child helps them understand and make plans for their future.

Discussing your illness with your children can help them make sense of any changes they notice in you and your family. Without your support, children will try understanding these changes on their own. Talking with your children will reduce their confusion, let them know they aren't to blame, and educate them about your illness and the treatments you are receiving.

### Be prepared

When you and your partner understand the illness you'll be more comfortable talking about it 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 to understand the illness by discussing it with a GP or mental health professional. Ask questions and speak about your personal experiences. Keep in mind that it can take time finding a health

professional you feel comfortable with and has the right fit for you.

Some parents find it difficult to broach the subject with their child as they worry it will burden them. On the contrary, many parents have reported how accepting their children were to learn about illness the first time. It's actually comforting to understand why things might be 'different' and that you're taking steps to manage the illness.

### The teenager's perspective

Adolescents are developing an adult perspective so they may already be interpreting symptoms or signs of mental illness. Giving your teenager factual information about the illness will help them put the pieces together. Teenagers can worry about the stigma often linked to mental illness.

They'll probably have questions about their own mental health and the impact your (or your partner's) mental illness might have on them and whether they'll be like you. They might also worry about their emerging independence balanced against your (or your partner's)



care needs. Discussing the causes, symptoms, treatments and support that's available to you and them will help reduce these fears.

## How to start

It can help children if you 'normalise' the illness. You can do this by referring to another adult or role model they might know of who has a mental illness.

Explain mental illness is not uncommon (one in five people have a mental illness) it's just that most people don't like to talk about it.

You might tell them, just as you can break your leg, or get a physical illness, your mind can also be sick or broken. You might decide to ask them if they've noticed any unusual behaviour and then explain it's because of the illness.

They should know how the illness may directly impact on them and others in the family

## Practical tips

- Create an atmosphere that welcomes open discussion by asking them what they notice and understand about your (or your partner's) symptoms and behaviours.
- Present factual-based information about the illness which you have researched and understand.
- Give them information about symptoms, your recovery and the range of help and strategies you find helpful.
- Lead them to information they can find themselves, eg. the 'Teens & Young Adults' section of COPMI's website or [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)
- Teenagers often find it comfortable 'talking while doing'. For example, you might find it easier starting a discussion while you're in the car, going for a walk or kicking a ball around.
- Be honest and sensitive about their increased vulnerability to mental health problems. Tell them the majority of children who have a

parent with a mental illness don't develop an illness themselves and effective treatments and supports are available if they do.

- Ask about fears of the illness and how they might influence their future plans and decisions (like moving out of home). Then talk through ideas that will help them make decisions or plans to reduce these fears.
- One discussion is usually not enough. Your child's questions and specific needs for information will change over time.
- See the *Raising Children Network* ([www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)) or call your state *Parentline* ([www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au)) if you need tips on how to relate to your child if you find it difficult.
- Look for videos, books or other resources for children on parental mental illness through *Get Info/Resources Search* function on the COPMI website at [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)

## Foster an open relationship

Encourage your child to talk about the illness with supportive friends and family. It's important to have an open and safe relationship with your child so they can ask all the 'scary' worst-case scenario questions on an on-going basis. Make them feel safe so they'll ask these questions and express their feelings which is good for their development and wellbeing.

## Recovery and self care

It's important to look after yourself and seek help when needed as this will reassure your child. Also children observe and often mimic choices and decisions their parents make. When you look after yourself you're being a good role model for them too; teaching them to care for their own mental and physical health.



**Talk to someone | Get more info**

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

**beyondblue** 1300 22 4636 | [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**SANE Australia** 1800 18 SANE (7263) | [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)