



## Talking with teenagers about parental mental illness

Most parents wonder about how to talk to a young person about parental mental illness.

This resource will help you prepare for conversations with your child about your mental illness so together you can better understand mental illness and recovery in your family. It steps you through:

- understanding your symptoms and behaviours.
- thinking about what your child notices and experiences.
- preparing to talk to 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 to 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. Then consider how these affect the way 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."*

John, TAS 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.

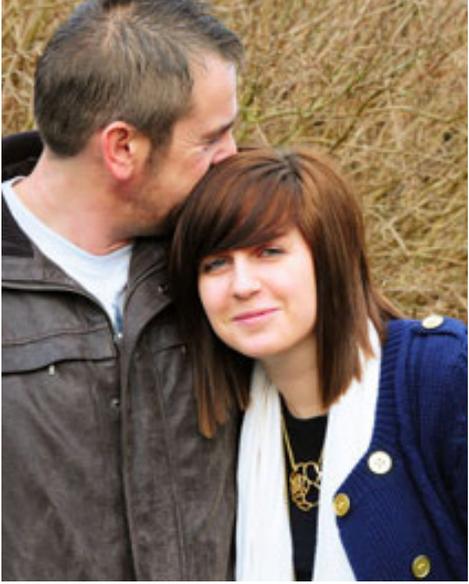
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Write five of the symptoms or behaviours that worry you the most at the top of the circles shown below. Focus on those that impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your child might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.



## Understanding what your teen notices and experiences

Children at different stages will notice and react to your behaviours and emotions differently. Parent-teen relationships can be complex. Teenagers are in the process of developing an adult view of the world. They are trying to make sense of their relationships with you and with others. Your behaviours may challenge how they see you and how they see themselves.

It is common for teenagers to worry about their parent, their parent's illness and how this impacts on their relationship with you. They may want to know how you were diagnosed and whether you will get better. Some teenagers also worry about whether they will develop a mental illness. They may want to know how to explain your illness to others without feeling like they are being disrespectful or disloyal to you.

Thinking about the symptoms and behaviours that you listed in the reflective exercise:

- how might your behaviour be affecting your teenager?
- how might your symptoms and behaviours impact on your relationship with them?
- which behaviours appear to be the most challenging for them?
- how might this impact on their involvement with community activities, friends or peers?
- what concerns might they have about their own mental health?
- how might your symptoms and behaviours be affecting their decisions?
- what information could help your teenager to understand what they have observed about your behaviours?

## Preparing to talk with your teen

Conversations with your child about your mental illness are important. These conversations can help you to understand your child's experiences and can help your child understand your experiences and the family situation. This may help them make sense of what is happening. When your child does not understand the situation, they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand what is going on. 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 to come to you (or others) when they are worried or overwhelmed.
- build an understanding that can strengthen your relationship.

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.



## Starting the conversation with your teen

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

- ‘What have you noticed that worries you?’

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:

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Tips to remember

- Young people access and receive information from a number of different places such as friends, television and online including social media. This information may not always match your experience, listen to your child and then explain your experience.
- Make sure that the discussion happens when you are both ready and calm.
- Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want but understand that they may need some time to process the information first, questions may come later.
- Set up a process so that if you are too unwell or do not

have the energy to answer your child’s questions, they know that you will make time for it later.

- One discussion is never enough – a shared understanding takes time and your child’s questions and need for information will change.
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you can not 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.

## Resources

A range of free resources that can help you to talk with your child about your mental illness are available at the COPMI website:

- ‘About Mental Illness’ - a series of short video clips for young people by young people who have a parent with a mental illness: [www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness](http://www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness)
- ‘When your parent has a mental illness’ - a booklet for teenagers to help them better understand a parent’s mental illness. This can be ordered or viewed online at the COPMI website [www.copmi.net.au/materials](http://www.copmi.net.au/materials)
- The Family Focus DVD - helps you to talk with your child if you experience depression/ anxiety. [www.copmi.net.au/family-focus-dvd-footage](http://www.copmi.net.au/family-focus-dvd-footage)