



# TALKING ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS WITH CHILDREN

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)

Talking about mental illness with your child helps alleviate worries about behaviour they might not understand.

Discussing your illness with your children can help them make sense of 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 supports you are accessing.

### 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, it sometimes it takes time to find a health professional you're comfortable with. 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.

### Child perceptions

Children are incredibly perceptive and many can accurately describe changes connected to their parent's illness (despite often well-intentioned efforts to keep them hidden). Try thinking about what your child might notice about the illness.

Children have very active imaginations and often imagine things are worse than they really are. They also have a tendency to blame themselves and have an exaggerated sense of responsibility for their parent's behaviours. This is why telling them about the illness is so important.

### How to start

It can help children if you 'normalise' the illness. You can do this by referring to another family member they might know of who has a mental issue. Explain

mental illness is not uncommon — one in four 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

- Avoid keeping mental illness a 'secret'.
- Keep your first discussion simple.
- One discussion is generally not enough as children's questions and needs for information will change as they grow.
- Talk to your child about recovery, tell them that people can manage their mental illness and live really good lives.
- Encourage open discussion about what they notice and understand about symptoms and behaviours.
- Ask them what they understand about words they use to describe mental illness. Children often use words they've heard but don't understand.
- Give correct, basic information they can understand. Don't support any wrong 'explanations' children may have made up.
- Ask about fears or worries and try to reduce these, by making practical plans.
- Tell them the mental illness isn't their fault and it's not their responsibility to make their parent better.
- Some children like to help, if so you can suggest small things they can do when you're unwell; like tidying up toys, picking a bunch of flowers or drawing a nice picture for you.
- Read our *Family Talk* booklet which offers advice for families where a parent has a mental illness. Call to order a copy or download it from our website.
- Tell your child about the information on our website for children who have a parent with a mental illness — [www.copmi.net.au/youth](http://www.copmi.net.au/youth)
- Use books or movies to help you discuss mental illness (see our online resources database — 'Get Info/Resources Search').

## Foster an open relationship

Encourage your child to talk about the illness with trusted and 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.

## 'What if ... ?'

Children can play out 'what if' scenarios in their minds. Their active imaginations can create distress about real or imagined events. In talking to them, you can try to understand their worries, dispel myths and make plans to reduce their concerns. Completing a 'care plan' with your child can reduce these 'what if' scenarios. For details on completing a care plan, visit our website ('Parents & Families').



**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)