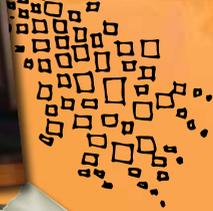
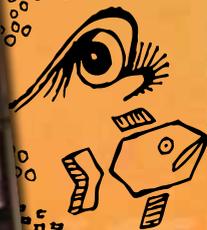


When your parent has a mental illness



www.copmi.net.au



COPMI

Children of Parents
with a Mental Illness

This guide has been created by the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) national initiative together with young people, their parents, families and supporters.

**Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of people who were interviewed during the development of this resource.*

This guide was prepared by the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association Ltd for the COPMI national initiative. COPMI is funded by the Australian Government. Further resources and information about COPMI can be found at www.copmi.net.au.

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COPMI

Children of Parents
with a Mental Illness



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Does this sound familiar?

'I worry that I might have the same problem...'

'Mum can be so embarrassing.'

'I feel guilty when I have fun.'

'Why can't I just have a normal family?'

'Will he get better?'

'No one understands what it is like.'

'I am all alone.'



It can be tough

If your parent experiences mental illness, it is normal for you to have all kinds of different feelings.

Some people say that it can be 'like riding a wave of emotions'.

You might not understand why your parent acts the way they do. You might find that things at home are really difficult. It might be hard to know how to understand your parent or what to do for them. This can leave you feeling stressed and helpless...and a whole lot of other things!

You are not alone

Lots of young people are in a similar position to you, with a parent who experiences mental illness.

This guide was written to help explain what is going on and to answer questions you might have. You will find information and useful tips to help you understand what is happening for your parent and ways to get help if you need it. You will hear advice and stories from other young people who live with parents who experience these difficulties. They share great advice on what can help.

When we talk about your 'parent' we refer to whoever you live with who takes care of you. It might be your birth parent, step-parent, grandparent, foster parent or others who support you.

Did you know?

- In Australia one out of every five adults experience mental illness.
- One out of every five kids live with a parent who experiences mental illness.
- That's about six out of the 30 kids in your class!

You may want to share this guide with your parent and ask them questions.

'I remember being so ashamed and embarrassed that Dad had a mental illness and I never wanted anyone to know. I felt like I was the unluckiest person in the world - like no one else knew what I was going through. That was before I found out how many others are in the same spot as me. I met some of them at the youth group.'

Emma, 15

Mental illness affects everyone



It is very common for people to have a mental illness. It can happen to anyone, at any age, living in any country in the world. It can happen to your mum, dad, sister, brother, cousin, grandparent, friend or teacher.

Mental illness affects people in the mind (or the brain). When people are unwell in the mind it causes them to think, feel and act in ways that are different to when they are well.



The difference between normal emotions and mental illness

We all have times when we feel sad, lonely, fed up, stressed or scared. We might cry or feel hopeless, feel that people don't understand us or that things are just too hard. These are normal feelings that are part of ordinary life.

When someone has a mental illness these feelings can be more intense than usual. The feelings can get on top of them so much that they may struggle to do simple, everyday things.

They might find it very hard just to get out of bed in the morning, make food to eat or get their kids to school. Their behaviour might seem out of control and they might be scared, restless, irritable, argumentative or even aggressive. They might know something is wrong but be so confused that they do not know how to make things better.

The good news is that different types of help and supports are available for people who become unwell with mental illness. People are able to live happy and healthy lives.

Facts

- Mental illness makes a person think, feel and act differently.
- Mental illness cannot be 'caught' like a cold.
- You can't cause another person's mental illness.
- Mental illness is not caused by being weak or having a lower intelligence.



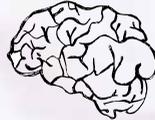
'I didn't really understand why Mum was so tired. My sister said she was just lazy. She used to go to bed for hours on the weekend and ask us to help clean up and get really grumpy. I was pretty worried at the time. But when I found out about what mental illness meant and how hard it was just to take us to school, I understood much better and didn't feel so scared by it. It is the illness that makes them feel terrible and act the way they do. People can't help that they have it and they can't just 'snap out of it' or try harder to feel better.'

Bella, 13

What is going on when someone has a mental illness?

When a person is unwell in a part of their body, it doesn't work properly (like a broken leg or an upset stomach). This leads to changes in how a person feels and behaves. When a person has a mental illness they experience changes in their mind (their brain) that can affect how they think, feel and act.

Brains can get sick too



The brain controls the body and just about everything we do. Inside the brain there are millions of tiny cells called neurons that 'talk to each other' day and night without ever stopping. Special chemicals in the brain help them do this, but sometimes there isn't enough of the chemical or too much of it.

When people don't have exactly the right amount of chemicals in the brain, it can cause them to act differently and say and do things that are not usual for them.

They might:

- Not 'be themselves'.
- Say or do things that are confusing.
- Be tired and sleep a lot.
- Stay up all night (and not sleep).
- Cry a lot or be unable to cry.
- Get angry for no reason.
- Be grumpy and irritable.
- Be confused, disoriented or stare into space.
- See or hear things that are not really there.
- Not know what is real or not real.
- Talk to themselves.
- Act weird or strange.
- Be worried people are after them.
- Go on unusual spending sprees.
- Worry or stress a lot of the time.
- Lose interest in what used to be fun for them.



Why does my parent have a mental illness?

We don't know exactly why some people develop a mental illness. There are usually lots of reasons and it's slightly different for everyone. Mental illness is not caused by one specific thing. It is usually caused by a combination of things. This might include:

- The brain working in a different way.
- Lots of extra stress or worries.
- Trauma from stressful events.
- Drug and alcohol misuse.

While we don't know exactly what causes mental illness, we do know **it's not your fault!**

You didn't cause your parent's mental illness **AND it's not up to you to make them feel better.**

'No one knows why my Mum got sick. But they think it had something to do with the hard times she had when she was growing up. She is pretty good now she has medication and a support group that helps her. I do some stuff around the house when she does overdo it and needs some help.'

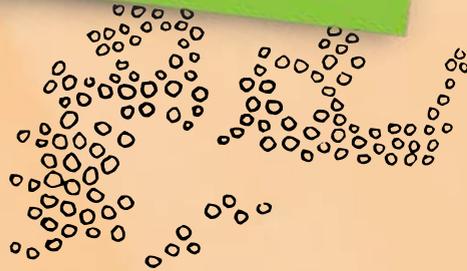
I get worried sometimes that I'm gonna be like her. Heaps of my Mum's family have a mental illness. But I haven't had the other things she's gone through and I also know who to call if I need help.'

Shane, 14

About mental illness

To learn more, check out the series of videos 'About mental illness':

www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness





Can I end up with the same issues?

Just because your parent has a mental illness doesn't mean you will end up with the same thing (even if you feel like you are similar or other people say how similar you are). Sometimes everyone gets sad, can't sleep, has things that go badly or feels scared. It is a normal part of life, so don't panic. The good thing is that these things pass in time.

The difference is people with mental illness can experience these feelings intensely most of the time. This can make it hard or sometimes impossible for them to carry on with tasks in their everyday lives.

Will there be a cure?

- Doctors and scientists can't be sure exactly what causes mental illness. Many spend their entire lives investigating why it happens so that they can help to find better treatments for people.

Treatments can help

- Treatments can help to address the symptoms of mental illness. They help people to feel more like themselves and to better manage their lives again.
- There are lots of different treatments that can help people with mental illness - medication is one. It can help balance the chemicals in the brain to make it work better.
- Counselling, support groups and different psychological treatments are available.



What if I'm really worried?

If you are really concerned that you are experiencing some of the same things you notice in your parent, it might be because you are going through something that is hard to cope with and you may need some help. We know from other young people that talking actually helps. You can talk to people you know and trust or to a professional.

See page 23 for more information on who you can talk with.



Types of mental illness

Each person is different and experiences mental health problems slightly differently. Often, mental health problems are labelled or named to help professionals refer people to the right care and treatment.



Depression

Depression is very different to just feeling low or overwhelmed. People who experience depression often feel very miserable, tired or exhausted for long periods of time. They often have no energy to do much at all – sometimes even to get out of bed or to eat. They might sleep all day and not want to do the things they once enjoyed. They might also feel stressed, grumpy or cry for what might seem no reason. Mums can sometimes get depressed after having a baby (called ‘postnatal depression’). It can make it hard to do ordinary things like take care of the baby or other kids.

‘My Dad is pretty cool, but when he is depressed he finds it really hard to do anything. He doesn’t talk much or have any energy. It’s like he is kind of not there when he is having a bad day.’

Ben, 13

Anxiety disorder

People who experience an anxiety disorder often have strong feelings of fear and worry. They feel this more intensely than the average person. They might worry continuously about things that seem small to others. They might have fears that stop them from doing normal, everyday things (like sleeping or going out in public). When people start to avoid things that worry or frighten them it is called a ‘phobia’.

‘Mum told me that sometimes when she is out in big crowds she just wants to run away. She feels scared, like everyone is out to get her. That is when she says ‘We need to get out of here, I don’t feel very good’ and we just leave.’

Ellie, 12

Bipolar disorder

People who experience bipolar disorder often have extreme moods. They might sometimes feel very down and miserable. At other times they may feel energetic, over-excited and unable to calm down. When they are feeling over-energetic they might not sleep much. They may go on huge shopping sprees, cook, clean lots, be really talkative or have big ideas. They might also be stressed and only able to concentrate for a very short amount of time.

'When Mum is not taking her medication properly she goes up and down. Like she will go on a manic high and be really dramatic or she will get depressed and tired, so it can be very hard to try and talk with her. It gets really confusing, because one day she will be fine, but the next day she will burst out crying.'

James, 14

Facts

- People with depression are not lazy.
- People who have an anxiety disorder are not weak.
- People with bipolar disorder are not over-reacting.
- People with schizophrenia do not have a 'split personality'.
- The way mental illness feels is slightly different for everyone.

Want to know more?

You can find out more about these and other mental illnesses at the COPMI website:

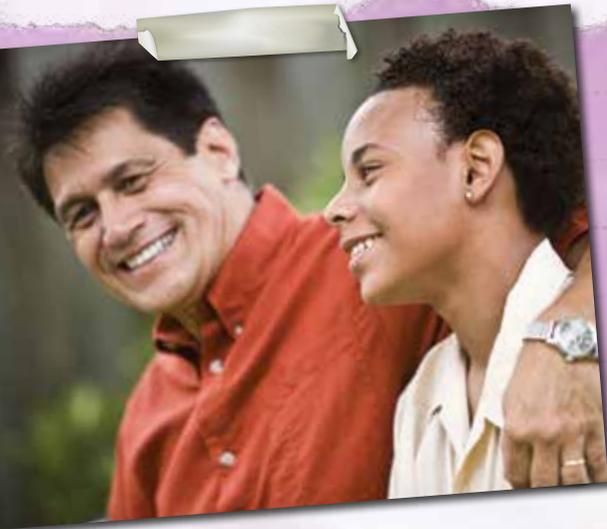
www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness

Psychosis and schizophrenia

People who experience psychosis have difficulty thinking clearly and understanding reality. As a person loses touch with reality, they might see or hear things that are not really there (hallucinations) or have unusual ideas that are not shared by other people (delusions). For example, they might believe that someone is trying to harm them or their family. It can be really frightening for people who are unwell and for their children and families, especially if they don't know that this is a form of illness. If a person has had more than one episode of psychosis and other symptoms that last longer than six months, they may be described as experiencing schizophrenia.

Post traumatic stress disorder

People who experience post traumatic stress disorder often get upset, scared, panicky, or react to very small things. This is a type of anxiety disorder that is often caused by a traumatic event (like being in a serious accident, being physically abused or being in a war, a natural disaster or a bushfire). The trauma of these situations is often re-lived in disturbing flashbacks and nightmares. This can affect their everyday life.



'Dad isn't really himself and he is always on edge, like he is scared of something happening. He is pretty grouchy because he doesn't sleep much and he doesn't like doing anything outside these days. It is not his fault though and I keep reminding myself that.'

Alex, 15

Obsessive compulsive disorder

People who experience obsessive compulsive disorder might feel that they have to repeat things over and over again (like washing their hands or touching certain things). They might be 'obsessed' with germs or keeping things in order and feel like they just can't stop themselves from being this way. People with obsessive compulsive disorder often feel that something terrible will happen to them or others if they don't repeat these things.

'We are sometimes really late for school because Mum has to check the iron and all the power points before we can go anywhere. She gets pretty on edge and doesn't like going out much now, unless she has to.'

Jen, 13



Borderline personality disorder

People who experience borderline personality disorder often have trouble with their emotions and relationships with other people. They might struggle with confusing mood swings and an intense fear of losing people close to them and need constant comfort. They may have sudden explosive tempers. They might even want to harm themselves. They may experience times when they feel scared and chaotic - an 'out-of-control' kind of feeling. Sometimes people say it is a bit like living your life on a 'roller coaster' but without the fun parts. Their behaviour is often not understood and is usually the result of feeling scared, lonely and hopeless.

'Mum would get very sad and very angry and the anger was a big sign that something was wrong. I distinctly remember walking home from school wondering what she would be like today. Some days we would get along so well - like we were best friends. Other days I would feel like I just couldn't do anything right. I wasn't allowed inside or was in trouble for some unknown reason.'

Evie, 15

Eating disorders

People experiencing eating disorders are often obsessed by thoughts about food and their body weight. This includes people who deliberately don't eat much at all (anorexia nervosa), people who 'binge' on lots of food in a very small time period and then make themselves vomit the food back up (bulimia) or people who overeat all the time (compulsive overeating). A person with an eating disorder can put huge effort into hiding it and may be constantly dieting, making excuses not to eat, avoiding social situations where there is food and exercising a lot. They might spend a lot of time worrying about what they look like and feel depressed, anxious or irritable.

'Mum feeds Josh while we are all eating and pretends to eat bits of his food. She hates people asking her if she has eaten. The thing is that she is so skinny already, but she doesn't see what she really looks like.'

Korey, 12



Your writing space

*Does your parent have a mental illness? What mental illness do they have?
What do you know about their illness?*

What concerns or worries do you have about your parent's mental illness?

What questions would you like to ask your parent about their mental illness and their symptoms and behaviour?

Will my parent get better?

People do get better from mental illness - but getting better can look different for everyone. Some people are unwell for a period of time and then get better, and their mental health problem never returns. Other people have problems for a long time, but there are periods in between when they are OK. Some people always experience symptoms of being unwell, but they can learn to live with their problems and still have happy and fulfilling lives.

Some things that can help people to get better

- Talking to other people who have lived through mental illness.
- Having good relationships with family and friends.
- Learning about how to have hope and staying positive about the future.
- Having meaning and purpose in life and feeling valued in the world.
- Feeling empowered to make decisions and choices about life and being responsible for those choices.
- Talking in a group with other people who have similar issues - so that they can encourage and support each other.
- Getting the right support and treatment. For example, seeing a doctor, speaking to a mental health professional at a health centre or taking medicine (medication).
- Spending some time in hospital, when needed.



Staying in hospital

Sometimes your parent might need to go to hospital to get help (even when they don't want to) because they need some extra support. Being in hospital means they will get the help they need to feel better, stay safe and keep others safe.

It is always hard especially if you do not understand what is happening. It can be very frightening for your parent too.

A team of mental health professionals (like nurses, social workers, psychiatrists or psychologists) will see your parent and do an assessment of their mental health. They will then work with your parent to figure out what will help them to get better. This may include medication, talking therapy, learning new coping skills or a range of other activities. The time your parent will spend there might vary from just a few days to much longer. This will depend on your parent's needs.

Facts

- People go to hospital when their symptoms have become much worse and they are not coping at home.
- Later on when they are coping better, they can go home.
- Sometimes they may need other types of help at home.
- Occasionally you might have to stay with someone (like a relative, friend or foster parent) until your parent is able to cope.



Can I visit?

When your parent goes to hospital it is a time for them to focus on getting themselves better. Some young people like to visit their parent and some don't – it is up to you and your family to decide what is best for you.

Every hospital is different so it is hard to know what to expect. There are generally lots of other people with a mental illness in hospital. Although some of them might act strangely, remember they are unwell and are there to get better.

Sometimes young people are not allowed to visit. There might be lots of reasons for this. It could be that your parent doesn't feel well enough to see you or that they might feel upset and don't want to worry you.

Other ways to connect

If you don't go and visit your parent there are still many ways to keep in touch. Ask if you can call them on the phone, send them a text message or write a letter. It can really help your parent to know that you are thinking of them and that you care.

Sometimes people don't tell young people what is going on because they don't want to worry them. It is important that you ask questions to people who can provide answers (like other adults in your family or the hospital staff). You may be asked to share information from your experience.

Sometimes you might not be able to visit your parent, but there are lots of ways that you can keep in touch.



'I was really worried when Dad went to hospital. Mum said people would just look like normal people, which was true. They wore normal clothes and wandered around but they were still acting pretty weirdly. There were old people there, but also people much younger, like my brother's age.'

Harry, 13

About medication

Medicine (or medication) is one of the treatments that professionals can recommend to help your parent when they are unwell.

Medication for mental illness usually works on the chemicals in the brain. Often this means taking a tablet, or sometimes a few tablets at the same time every day for a long period of time. Some medication can also be given as an injection by a professional.

Medication can take a while to help

Sometimes it can take a while before you start to see the medication helping your parent. Sometimes the doctor will need to change the amount or type of medication someone is taking to get the best result. Most medications do have side effects (like dizziness, nausea, exhaustion, sleep problems or gaining weight).

Remember:

- Some people only need to take medication for a short time. Others have to take it for the rest of their life.
- Everyone is different, and so are their experiences of mental illness and how they respond to different

treatments and medications.

- Never take anyone else's medication. Medication that is helpful for one person can be very dangerous for someone else.



Some people struggle with remembering to take medication every day and some people just don't like to take it (they find it hard to deal with the side effects or think they are OK without it). When they start the medication, for a short time it might feel like things are actually getting worse. After a few weeks the body gets used to it and things usually get better. That is why it is important to take the medication exactly as the doctor says.

Some people always experience symptoms of being unwell, but learn to live with the mental illness and can still be happy and enjoy life.

Medication doesn't work for everyone, but there are other things that can help (like seeing a counsellor or therapist, exercising regularly, meditating or doing relaxation exercises). All of these things can help people to feel better and manage their mental illness.



'My Mum took ages to respond to her medication. But when it did finally kick in she felt so much better. Actually, she felt so good she thought she didn't need the tablets anymore and stopped them. This didn't go well, but her doctor helped. He said she has to be on them for a long time. So now she has gone back on them and doing really well. She is more like her old self and she has even gone back to work. She knows she might have to take the tablets for the rest of her life, but she is pretty used to it now and so are we. We are just so happy she is back to herself again.'

Kate, 15



It is OK to have feelings

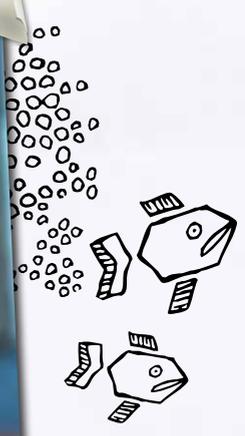
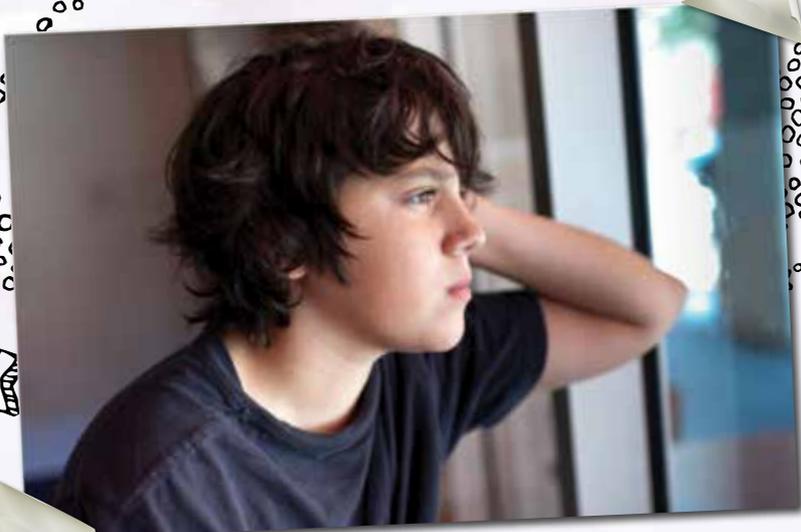


You might have a confusing mix of feelings when your parent experiences mental illness. It is quite normal and OK to feel angry or sad, or to feel embarrassed or ashamed by your parent's behaviour. Sometimes you might feel bitterness and at the same time feel sad and worried. This is all completely normal! It is OK to talk about this with a trusted adult – it's not being disloyal.

When you are not getting along

Sometimes it might feel like you are not getting along with your parent. They might be grumpy or seem like they are not interested in seeing you or spending time with you. When people are unwell it can make it really difficult for them to be with other people or even just to talk to them. They might not be able to listen to you or to see your point of view. When this happens, almost all young people think that they are somehow to blame.

The truth is that your parent probably doesn't realise how they are acting towards you or others, or may not have the energy to think it through. The experience of mental illness may take away their ability to relate to you like they normally do. It is really important to remember that it is not your fault and you are not responsible for making them feel better. That is what professionals help them to do.



Do you ever feel unsafe?

If you ever feel unsafe at home or like you can't cope, talk to an adult you can trust like another adult family member, your doctor, your teacher, your school counsellor or call the Kids Helpline (phone 1800 551 800) as soon as you can.

You don't have to solve the situation on your own and there are people who can help. In an emergency (if you're afraid that your parent might hurt themselves or hurt someone else) always call '000' straight away. If your parent has told you not to call for help and you are feeling unsafe, you should immediately call '000' and then ask for either the police or an ambulance.

It can be really stressful when emergency services come to your house, so try to find someone to talk to afterwards. If you don't have anyone to discuss this with, call the Kids Helpline (phone 1800 551 800) and have a chat.



What to do

- If you find you're having trouble getting along with your parent, see this great website that has heaps of information that can help:
<http://au.reachout.com/family-conflict-with-parents>

- If it is an emergency and you need help for your parent straight away, always call '000'. That's if:

- Your parent is hurt.
- You can't wake your parent.
- Your parent or anyone else is being violent or doing something dangerous.

- Their behaviour frightens you.
- You are alone and don't know where your parent is.



Your writing space

It is good to get in touch with your feelings (or to know what they are). What are the things that influence how you feel?

Who can you talk to about your feelings? Starting your conversation with 'I am feeling' (confused, angry, worried) may help.



Talking really helps



Keeping your feelings bottled up inside is not healthy. It is really important to find someone you can talk to, as it can help you to feel less alone. Talk to someone you can trust. Remember, it is hard for people to understand how you feel if you don't tell them!

If you feel you can't talk to your parent, you could try talking to:

- Your sister or brother.
- Another trusted family member or relative (like a grandparent).
- Your teacher at school.

You might also need to contact an adult you trust if you are really worried about your parent. You can always talk to your other parent about it (if you have one) or you could think about someone you trust outside of the family. Professionals you could talk to include:

- A doctor.
- Your school counsellor.
- A youth worker.
- A social worker.



- If you need to talk, call the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 at any time of the day or night.
- It is for young people up to 25 years old.
- Calls are free, even from mobiles!
- Calls are private.
- There are trained counsellors who know how to help people.



What happens when you talk to a counsellor?

A counsellor is a person who has been professionally trained to talk to people about different types of problems. They work in all kinds of organisations (like schools, universities, health centres and workplaces).

Your conversations with counsellors are private. They are there to listen to what is on your mind and not to judge you. They will talk to you about how you are feeling and coping with things. They will ask you questions to help you find solutions to your problems or suggest other things that might help.



Remember that counsellors are used to hearing from people in similar situations to you.





Finding the right words

It can be hard to know how to start a conversation or to ask for help, particularly if you are feeling overwhelmed or if sharing your thoughts is new for you.

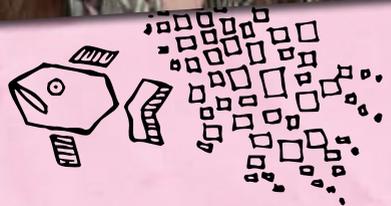
Consider starting with a small statement, like the ones below.

- If you are talking to someone who doesn't know your parent's situation (for example):

'My Mum/Dad has a mental illness and I have been finding things really hard. I was wondering if we could talk about it because I think I need some help.'

- If you are talking to someone who knows you and your family, you might start by describing what is happening or how things may have changed at home (for example):

'I am worried about Mum. When I get home from school, she is always in bed sleeping. She doesn't seem to notice me and I hear her crying a lot. I am not sure what to do.'



Talking to your parent

It is good to try to talk to your parent about what is going on. It might feel hard, but a conversation can start with a simple worry that is on your mind, like:

'Mum, I have heard you crying and you are always in bed. I'm worried. What is going on?'

Try to have a talk when things are good at home and no one is upset or angry. You could even show them this guide as a starting point.

Talking to your parent about mental illness is never finished in one go. It is something that can start small and build into bigger talks over time. You might worry that it will upset your parent – but they often feel better when you understand what is going on!

Talking is healthy

- Remember, you are not betraying your parent if you talk about how you feel. It is a human need to share our feelings.
- Talking about feelings and being understood can help.



'I didn't tell anyone about Dad. I guess I felt worried about what people would think and that they wouldn't 'get it'. I also felt guilty, because I know some people have it worse. But my counsellor at school was great. When I finally told her about it, I felt like a huge weight had gone.'

Greg, 14

Your writing space



Make a list of five people you can talk to if you feel worried about your parent. They can either be inside the family or outside the family. It can be helpful to copy these details on to a piece of paper with their phone numbers and to put it into your bag (incase you need to call them). Here is one to start with:

- Kids Helpline (1800 551 800)

Make a list of the questions you would like to ask your parent and the things you would like to discuss when it is the right time to talk.



Coping at school

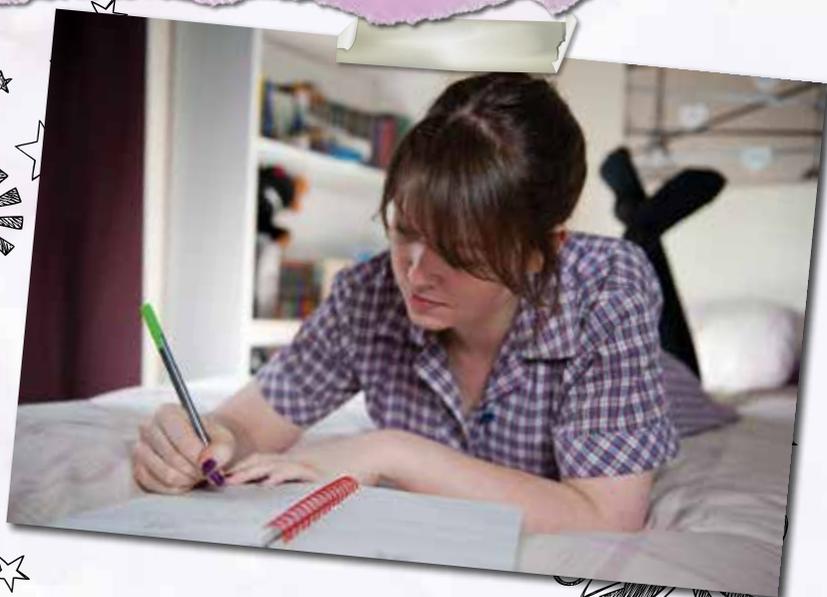
It is normal for problems at home to affect you when you are at school. You don't have to pretend you are OK when you are not OK.

The good news is that you can get help – and no one has to know. In most schools you can go to the school counsellor at any time and speak to them privately about what is going on. They can talk to your teacher for you (so you don't have to) or you might choose to ask them to keep it private and to see them regularly to talk.

If you don't feel like talking to them yourself, you could also ask your parent to talk to your teacher so they can understand what it is like for you at home and to give you extra support or extensions on your assignments. Other young people have said it can be a really good move that helps a lot.

'The school has been awesome. They have given me extra time on assignments if I need it. They have set me up with counselling and given us boxes of food sometimes if I need to cook that night.'

Sarah, 15



Dealing with stigma

Mental illness is very common although people don't talk about it much. 'Stigma' is when people treat you differently or even make fun of you because your parent is different, making you feel ashamed or alone. It usually happens when people are afraid and don't understand what it is like or they have the wrong information.

So you might find yourself being treated differently at school or your friendships might be suffering. You might be teased or bullied and you might prefer to spend more time by yourself rather than hanging out with others. It may be that you prefer to 'hide' the issue or choose not to continue social stuff or invite friends over anymore. You may have noticed your friends' parents may even act differently towards you.

Try not to feel embarrassed or frightened by people's ignorance and lack of understanding. They just don't have the knowledge that you do about what is going on. If they get nasty it is best to walk away or to ask a teacher for help. Then again, if it's your friends who don't understand, you could help to educate them about how mental illness is common. Remember, one in five people experience a mental illness every year. You might actually help them become more aware by being honest with them.

'When I'm just not coping with it all, I see the school counsellor. It really helps to talk to someone because the other kids at school just don't understand and I feel really alone. No one knows what it is about apart from my teacher, which is the way I like it.'

Casey, 14

Remember...

- It is unfortunate that there are still many people in the community who have negative ideas about mental illness. We can all play a part in changing this!
- Remember you can always call the Kids Helpline (phone 1800 551 800) or send an email: counsellor@kidshelpline.com.au
- Teenagers can also go onto the internet for web counselling and advice: www.kidshelpline.com.au

School support

Read about how you can get help at school on the COPMI website:
www.copmi.net.au/at-school

Taking time out

It is really important to get time to take a break from home stuff (or school). It is not selfish. It is important to look after yourself.

Other young people have said it really helps to do some of the following things:

- Visit a friend or go out for a coffee.
- Take a walk outside or get into nature (but tell someone where you are going).
- Have a bubble bath.
- Hire a DVD or go to the movies.
- Play some music or dance around your room.
- Write in your diary.
- Do some physical stuff (like go for a run, punch your punching bag, or whack a ball).
- Yell your feelings into a pillow.
- Talk to your dog or cat (they can be very understanding).
- Have a nap or just practice some relaxation exercises.

Get some 'you time'

- Taking time out actually helps your body and mind to cope better with your home situation and with everything else!

'We worked out how I could go back to soccer. I am glad because I was feeling pretty low myself. I think I deal much better with things after I have had a break. I don't feel as stressed about home.'

Shaun, 13





- One thing that other young people have said really helps is to be part of a peer group. These are groups just for young people who are in a similar situation to you. These groups give you a safe place to go and friends to talk to who understand.

- Check out the COPMI website for peer groups near you or call Young Carers Australia on 1800 242 636.

'I met so many other people like me that actually knew what it was like to be in my situation. Getting time off school was just the icing on the cake. We learnt all about what the mental illnesses are and ways to cope with our parents and the people around us. We played games and watched movies. My favorite part was once a year at the end of the year, where they would take us to this thing called 'Camp Getaway'. The camp was awesome. I made so many close friends I couldn't believe it. I am so thankful to the psychologist for offering to put me into the group.'

Callandra, 13 (member of a peer group)

Your writing space

Make a list of five different things you can do to take time out. They need to be things that you really enjoy or find relaxing.

How can I help my parent?



One of the most common things that young people want to know about when their parent experiences mental illness is what they can do to help. It is normal to have all kinds of feelings and to feel helpless not knowing what to do.

There are lots of things you can do that other parents say have helped them

- Learn about their mental illness so you understand what is going on.
- Keep yourself (or your brother or sister if you have them) entertained when your parent is having a bad day.
- Make sure you take some time out to do your own thing and keep up your activities outside of home (like playing sport or seeing your friends).
- Talk to someone when you need to and let your parent know you are doing this if it helps you. It could be face-to-face with a close friend, a family member you feel close to (like a grandparent, aunt or uncle) or a school counsellor. You can also go online to receive email or web counselling (see the last page of this guide) or phone the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Helping out around the house

If your parent isn't able to do their usual household jobs, it is good to help out - but don't take on all the things they used to do by yourself. Talk about how to manage with help from the rest of your family or see if you can get some extra help from relatives, friends, your school counsellor or support services in your local area (see the last page of this guide).

Are you a young carer?

Are you taking on extra things to help your parent like:

- Cooking or cleaning.
- Helping them with medication or appointments.
- Checking on your parent to make sure they are okay?

You might be a young carer.

Help for young carers

- Free help is available for young carers. Visit the Young Carers Australia website:

www.youngcarers.net.au

- You can also call them on 1800 242 636.



When you need to move out

If your parent is very unwell you might decide you need to move in with another family member like your other parent or step-parent, a grandparent, aunt, uncle or perhaps a family friend. It can be difficult to leave your parent without feeling that you have let them down, but it's important that you feel safe and are well cared for.

You can still keep in contact with your parent and visit them often. Moving out is a big decision and it can be helpful to talk it over with someone who understands. The national Carer Advisory Service has counsellors available who can help with this sort of decision (phone 1800 242 636).

Remember...

- It is really important to find a balance between helping your Mum or Dad and living your own life.

'When I was about 13 my Mum got really ill, and I decided to go and live with my Dad and step-sister for a while. We would still go and visit her, but the lady next door helped her with the house and the cooking instead of me, which was good.'

Kellie, 20



Advice from other young people

Remember...you are not alone. There are over a million young people in Australia who live with a parent who has a mental illness. Many young people in your situation have spoken about what they would have wanted to know when they were first getting their head around things, or what advice they would give to someone in their position.



Here is what they have said:

- 'It is normal to feel confused about how to help your parent – or to feel responsible, even though you are not.'
- 'Know that knowledge and time will make it easier to manage.'
- 'Remember it is not your parent's fault and their behaviour is because of an illness, not because of you. Remind yourself!'
- 'Remember to have time apart sometimes. Time out can help.'
- 'You don't have to be perfect. You can show when you are struggling.'
- 'Looking after yourself actually helps your parents. It's one of the best things you can do for everyone.'
- 'Be careful when looking on the internet. Lots of information on Google can be wrong. Go to a reliable website. See the last page of this guide for helpful examples.'
- 'Try to remember to be your own 'best friend' throughout it all.'

'I really would have liked to know at the time that it wasn't my fault because I thought somehow it was. The good thing is that with time and proper treatment, people do get better. But it can take a while...you just got to hang in there and have some good friends or someone you can talk to.'

Sophie, 18

'I would have loved to know earlier that there were kids out there like me. It was scary going along to the peer group at first, but it is the best thing Mum ever got me to do. I'm really not alone anymore and I can get through it, just like I know other people have.'

Jazz, 15

'It can be pretty stressful at times...but the good thing is that you can actually come out of it a much stronger and better person.'

Dan, 19

