

FAMILY TALK

Tips and information
for families where
a parent has a
mental health
problem or disorder

Who is this booklet for?

Everyone in families affected by a parent's mental health problem or disorder!

This booklet provides tips, helps answer some of the questions children and young people have, and gives ideas about where families may seek help. All families can use a helping hand at times – asking for help or support is sensible and a sign of strength, not failure.

Where can I find the information for me?

Parents and partners	pages 1 – 3
Children and young people	pages 4 – 5
Extended family and others who care	page 6
The whole family (but mainly the adults)	pages 7 – 9
Where to seek help	back cover

Acknowledgements

This booklet was prepared by the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association Ltd (ABN 87 093 479 022) for the Australian Government Department of Health.

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) is an Australian Government initiative.

Further resources and information about the initiative can be found at www.copmi.net.au

We would like to thank the many people who provided information and reviewed drafts of this booklet.

Published by Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association Ltd.

Designed, illustrated and produced by Motiv Brand Design.

Reprinted 2014

© Commonwealth of Australia 2004

ISBN 0-9752124-0-0

Booklets can be ordered online at www.copmi.net.au or by phoning the COPMI national initiative on (+61 8) 8367 0888.

Also available in the series: *Piecing the Puzzle Together* and *The Best for Me and My Baby*.



Information for parents and partners



While being a parent can be delightfully rewarding, it can also be very challenging at times – and more so if you or your partner is struggling with ill-health.

Raising children is always costly and some of the suggestions in this booklet have a cost attached to them. If this presents difficulties for you, speak to a social worker, financial counsellor or community worker about access to financial assistance.

As a **parent with a mental health problem or disorder**, one of the most important things to remember is to **care for yourself** – your children need you to be as well as possible. Talk with your doctor and other health workers about if and how your illness or medication impacts on your important job of parenting.

If you're a **parent who is the partner** of someone with a mental illness, you also need to take care of yourself. You may like to contact the Carer Advisory and Counselling Service on Freecall 1800 242 636 for information.

- Consider setting aside some time every week for something you enjoy such as playing a sport, listening to music or participating in a craft activity.
- Getting enough sleep and physical activity, and eating healthy foods are important for all the family; not just the children.
- Identify your strengths as a parent, as a partnership and as a family. There will be things that you are good at doing or that are best done by **you** with your children. However, there may be other things that could be done by someone else.
- If you don't have a partner, it may help to talk things through with a family member, a trusted friend or a service provider who knows you well.

Tips from people with mental illness who have raised children



‘My kids were much happier once we had a plan in place in case I became unwell or had to go to hospital again.’

Planning for your children’s needs is vitally important and ensures you have a say in what happens to them if you become ill.

Include the children in the planning when they are old enough so they can be reassured that everything will be OK and that you love them. They might have concerns you had not thought to plan for – like who will give them their pocket money or feed the cat if you become ill. Examples of Care Plans for babies, young people and the whole family can be found at www.copmi.net.au/careplans

Some organisations run holiday, evening and weekend programs especially for children or young people with a parent with mental illness and most participants really enjoy these special, safe and structured activities. Ask your health worker about them or check the programs listed at www.copmi.net.au/get-help

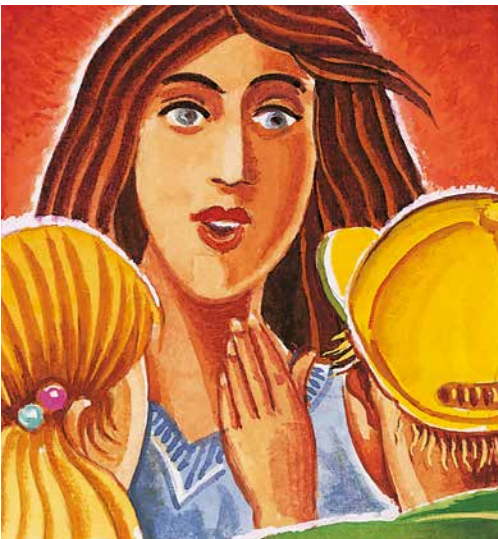
‘I used to get very tired during the school holidays so it was great to be able to take a break from my sons and they really enjoyed themselves at camp.’

Sometimes children may need a break from their parents, and parents may need a break from their children – especially if the parent has low energy levels due to illness or medication. Older children may also like a break from extra responsibilities they may have in your family.

- **Preschoolers** often enjoy a regular time at a childcare centre or with a babysitter. Call the Child Care Access Hotline on Freecall 1800 670 305 for information about services near you.
- **Primary school children** might enjoy a more formal activity such as a sport or hobby club.
- **Adolescents** may prefer to just be with friends, having a pizza or going to a movie.

‘Talking to the kids about my own feelings helped them open up about some of their worries – which I could then set their minds at rest about.’

It’s natural for people in families affected by mental health problems to have strong feelings such as bewilderment, anger, grief or loss from time to time. However, children often hide their feelings, especially if they sense there is some ‘secret’ associated with the illness.



It is important for all family members to have a chance to have their questions answered. You may like to ask your key health professional (e.g. your case worker or GP) for a time with your family to answer their questions.

‘When I stopped hitting the grog, the kids were happier and so was I.’

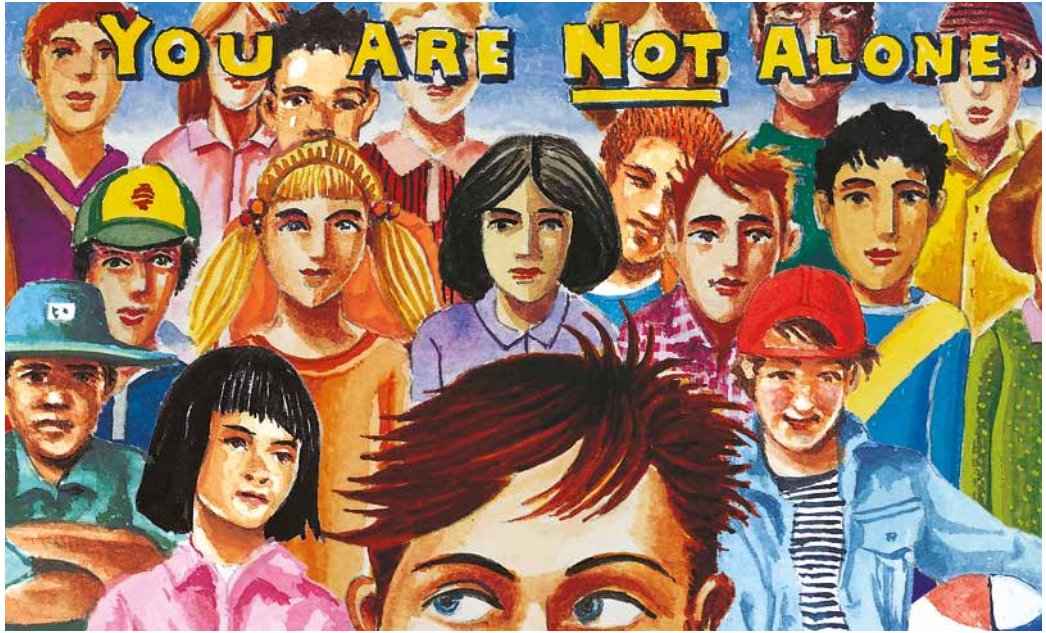
People sometimes feel that using alcohol and other drugs (including misuse of prescription drugs) will help them feel better. It may do in the short term but can affect your physical and mental health and it really hinders anyone’s ability to parent well. There are non-judgmental services available to help – call the Family Drug Support Line on Freecall 1300 368 186.

‘It was great when my sister offered to help with the weekend chores so that I could get to my daughter’s netball games.’

We all need friends or family to help us through; be honest with them about what helps you most. If you don’t have friends or family who can help, other household support may be available in your area – call the Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre on Freecall 1800 052 222.

You have a right to ask for help if you don’t feel that you or your children are safe. Speak to a health worker you trust or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Information for children and young people



'I used to think that maybe it was my fault.'

You did not cause your parent's mental health problem

Mental illness is no-one's fault.

You have a right to feel safe

If you have felt scared or unsafe in the past, make a plan for what you could do if you felt like that again. Some kids like to talk through and write their plan with their parents or an adult they can trust.

'Did you know that 1 in every 5 people will have a mental health problem at some time in their life? I thought it was just in our family.'

You are not alone

Lots of children and young people live in families where a parent has a mental illness or mental health problem. Sometimes it's great to meet other kids who've gone through some of the same things as you. Ring Kids Helpline on Freecall 1800 55 1800 or visit the websites listed on the back cover to find out more.

Tips for you from other children and young people

‘Find out about your Mum or Dad’s illness.’

Ask your parents about it or ask them if it’s OK for you to talk to a doctor or other health worker about the illness or health problem. Check out the website at www.itsallright.org for easy-to-read information about different mental health problems.

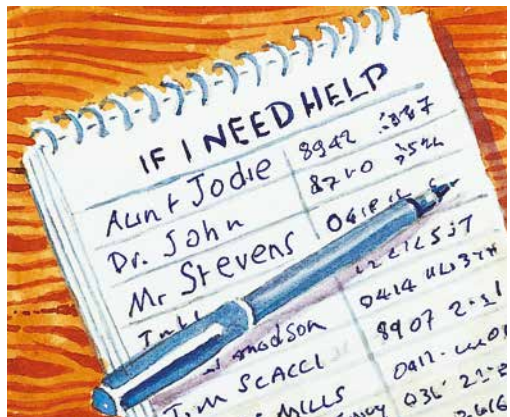
‘Ask as many questions as you like – if you’re like me you’ll find that the ‘real’ story about the illness isn’t half as bad as some of the things you were worrying about.’

‘It was great when I found someone I could talk to about things.’

It often helps to talk to someone you trust about how you’re feeling – maybe a family member, your best friend at school, a school counsellor or doctor. Or you could ring and talk to someone at Kids Helpline on Freecall 1800 55 1800.

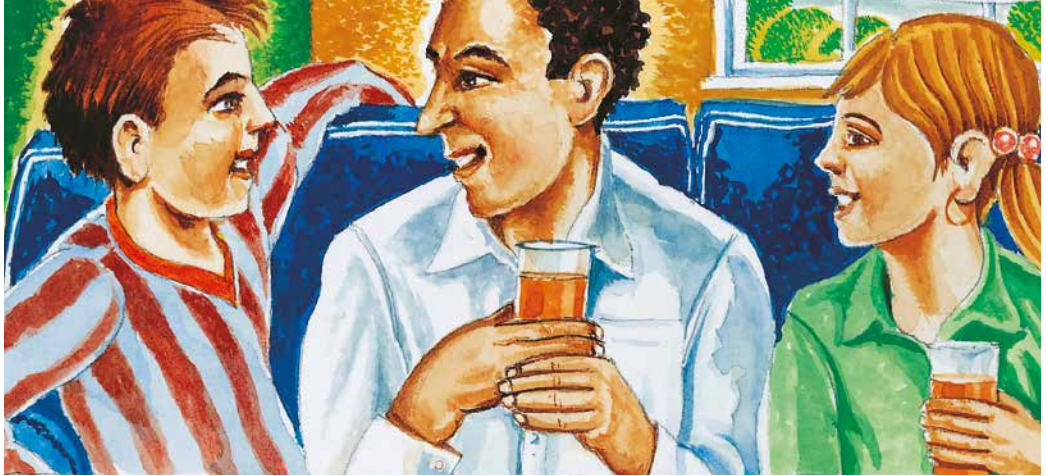
‘Make sure you have some fun.’

It’s great when family members can help each other out. If you’re having to take on more than your fair share though, try to make sure you get regular breaks. There are people who can help, so talk to someone at the Carer Advisory and Counselling Service on Freecall 1800 242 636. In some states Carers Australia runs special groups and camps for young people who provide support to a parent who is unwell.



‘Write out a list of the names and phone numbers of the people who you can ring if you need to.’

Tips for the extended family and others who care



‘Things changed for the better when I stopped and asked them how I could help rather than just going in and doing things for them.’

Parents with a mental illness may need extra support from families and friends.

- Ask the family how best you can support them.
- Talk with the parent about their illness and ask if it’s OK to find out more. Discuss any symptoms and warning signs and how you can support them.
- Be understanding and let the parents and children know that they don’t have to manage on their own.

You have a right to ask for information that will help you support the family as best you can, but you must also respect the privacy of the person with the health problem or illness.

‘It seemed like sometimes my teacher was the only one who asked how I was – everyone else was just so worried about Dad.’

- Remember to ask the children how they feel about what is happening or has happened.
- ‘Be there’ for the children and young people to talk to if need be and also think of practical ways in which you can help make the children’s life as much like their school friends’ as possible.
- Let family members express their true feelings – try to be patient and non-judgmental.

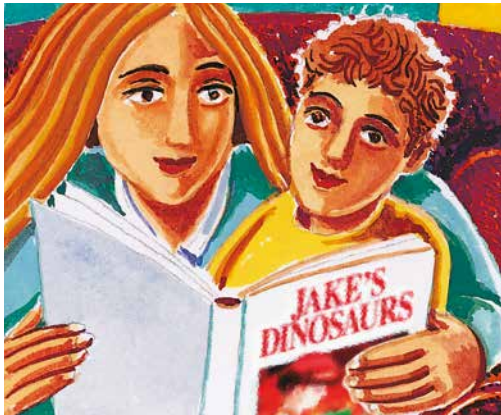
‘Look after yourself – caring can be exhausting.’

Discussing things as a family

We all have different ways that we prefer to communicate. Some children and parents love to talk face-to-face, others prefer to talk when they're doing something with each other (such as building with blocks or preparing a snack together). Think about how and when it might be best to talk about things – and remember, talking isn't the only way to communicate. Ask your doctor or health worker about books written specifically for children about mental health problems.

Printable information sheets about how to talk to children of different ages can be found at
www.copmi.net.au/talking

A list of books for different age groups can be accessed at
www.copmi.net.au/resource-search

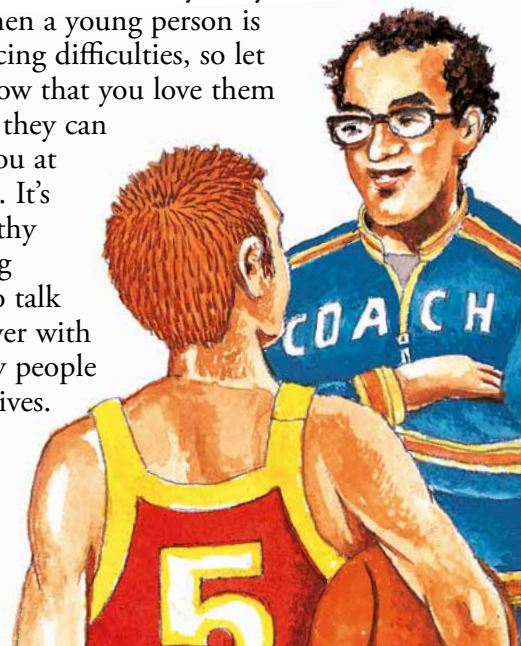


Preschoolers may require a lot of reassurance and they need explanations in simple words. Try talking in a story form or by drawing pictures or using picture books.



Primary school children need information at their own level. They may be more able to talk about their own feelings and their parent's feelings at this stage but also need 'straight forward' answers at a practical level about the illness and what will happen if the parent becomes ill. Try to keep your answers simple.

Teenagers often talk when they are ready to, rather than at a time of someone else's choosing. Leave the way open for communication, provide literature and discuss things as honestly as you can. It's not always easy to know when a young person is experiencing difficulties, so let them know that you love them and that they can talk to you at any time. It's also healthy for young people to talk things over with other key people in their lives.



Answering questions from children and young people



Children may have unfounded fears and worries relating to the illness, so encourage them to ask questions. It may be useful to think ahead about how you might respond to questions from your children and/or their friends. Your doctor or other health worker can help if you'd like to talk it over with someone before talking with your child.

It may also be useful to think about what, if anything, you might tell your child's teacher or someone like the parents of your child's best friend – though it's certainly your right to retain your privacy.

If the children aren't living with the parent with the mental illness, it is still important for their questions to be answered.

The other parent or caregiver needs to be well-informed and non-judgmental in sharing information with children about mental illness.

Common questions children ask

'Did I do something wrong?'

Children often blame themselves when things go wrong. Make sure they realise that mental ill-health is no-one's fault and can be treated like other illnesses.

'Can I help make it better?'

Some children think that their parent will recover their health if they try harder at school or try to behave perfectly. However, when this doesn't seem to work, they may become frustrated, angry or bewildered.

It is important to let them know that they are not responsible for their parent feeling unwell.

Remember to ask the children occasionally how they are feeling about what is happening.

‘Why aren’t you like other mums/dads?’

Children and young people are as vulnerable to the stigma and negative attitudes surrounding mental illness as the person with the mental health problem. Illness or medication may cause you to act differently from other parents or may restrict the activities you can be involved in. Lots of young people may appear to be embarrassed by their parents or sometimes don’t want to be seen with them; this is quite natural. Talk with your children about the impact of your illness or medications and be sensitive to their feelings.

‘Will I catch it?’

Children and adolescents who may be concerned about their own future often ask this question. While it’s difficult to answer simply, it is important that it be addressed. Let children know that mental illnesses are not contagious and cannot be caught like measles or chicken pox. It may be helpful to learn about the mental health problem and whether or not it has a hereditary component, but let them know that ‘risk’ does not mean ‘destiny’.

Children’s understanding of the world changes as they develop, so you may need to answer these questions more than once. Children can manage more complex information as they get older.



A range of information about different mental illnesses is available – your GP, other health worker or public library can provide information, and you can call the numbers or visit the websites listed on the back cover. You may also wish to make a joint appointment with your doctor/case worker and your child to discuss the issues.

‘When will you be better?’

It’s important to answer children honestly about the mental health problem or disorder and its treatment, especially when it is likely that although with help their parent may feel better, there may also be times in the future when they feel unwell and need help again.

For more information and help

Ask your GP, health worker, community health centre, school, preschool or child care centre director/worker about local services and information – or call the numbers below for help.

Carer Advisory and Counselling Service ... 1800 242 636
(For information, advice and support)

Child Care Access Hotline 1800 670 305
(For information and advice about your local child care options)

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre
(For information about local support services) ... 1800 052 222

Family Drug Support Line 1300 368 186
(For 24-hour telephone assistance with alcohol and drug related issues)

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
(For 24-hour counselling and support for children and young people aged 5–25 years)

Lifeline 13 11 14
(For 24-hour telephone counselling and referral to other support services)

MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78
(For 24-hour telephone information and support services)

Mental Illness Fellowship Helpline .. 1800 985 944
(For information and referral to local support services)

SANE Helpline 1800 187 263
(For information, advice and referral to support services)

Parent Helplines

(For information, counselling and support)

ACT (02) 6287 3833 **VIC** 13 22 89

NSW – Karitane Careline .. 1300 227 464 **SA** 1300 364 100

– Parentline 1300 1300 52 **WA** (08) 6279 1200

– Tresillian 1800 637 357 or 1800 654 432

NT 1300 30 1300 **QLD** ... 1300 30 1300

TAS 1300 808 178

Useful websites

(Remember, the internet is available at local libraries)

Carers Australia www.carersaustralia.com.au

Child and Youth Health www.cyh.com

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness).....

..... www.copmi.net.au

Family Drug Support..... www.fds.org.au

itsallright.org www.itsallright.org

Kids Helpline www.kidshelp.com.au

Mental Health and Wellbeing..... www.mentalhealth.gov.au

Mental Health in Multicultural Australia www.mhima.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia..... www.mifa.org.au

Raising Children Network..... www.raisingchildren.net.au

ReachOut au.reachout.com

SANE Australia..... www.sane.org



Useful websites

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness):
www.copmi.net.au/youth

itsallright:
www.itsallright.org

ReachOut:
au.reachout.com

Useful websites

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness):
www.copmi.net.au/youth

itsallright:
www.itsallright.org

ReachOut:
au.reachout.com



Useful websites

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness):
www.copmi.net.au/youth

itsallright:
www.itsallright.org

ReachOut:
au.reachout.com

