

Helping Children Understand Mental Health Conditions

A Resource for Parents and Guardians from Mental Health Association of Southeastern PA



Mental illness can be frightening — not only to the person who has it but also to people around them. If you are a child and reliant on the care of an adult who has a mental illness, things can be even more confusing. Children may have several questions, such as, “Why is my mom or dad this way?”, “Will I become this way?”, and “Who will take care of me if my mom or dad is sick?”

If a child you care for has a parent with a mental illness, it is important to take time to address their questions and concerns. Helping a child understand their parent’s or guardian’s illness will make the illness seem less “frightening” and give the child the tools they need for a more confident, safe, and happy life.

Here are some tips that may help when talking to a child about mental illness and answers to some commonly asked questions.

IDEAS TO ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION

It can be less threatening to start by asking children why they think their mom/dad sometimes acts “different” or “strange.” Then, use their comments or questions as an opening to talk more about mental illness.

If you think a child wants to talk to you but is afraid to open up, here are some questions you might want to ask them. It is important to remember, though, that if a child does not want to talk to you, you should not force them. Just let them know that you are there for them and ready to listen if they do want to talk.

Children may feel guilty about being embarrassed by their parent’s illnesses. Ask a child about the way their parent acts and how it makes them feel. Explain that mental illness

can make parents act in strange, confusing, or scary ways sometimes.

Children often feel responsible for their parent's illness or feel as though it is somehow their fault. One way to start this conversation is to ask if they ever feel as though there is something they could do to make the problem go away or if they somehow feel they are to blame for the way their parent has been acting. Just be very careful that you don't imply (or let the child feel you imply) that this is somehow their fault.

Another approach would be to say, "You know, I sometimes wish there was something I could do (or wish I had done differently) to make your mom/dad better. But I know that mental illness is nobody's fault..."

If a child asks you a question you don't know how to answer, be honest. Tell them you don't know, but you will try to find out.

HELPING CHILDREN WITH THEIR FEELINGS

A child's feelings may vary depending on how old they are and how much they understand about their parent's illness. Younger children often feel guilty or afraid while older children tend to feel more anger and embarrassment.

Create an atmosphere that would encourage children to talk about their feelings:

- ▶ Talk about your own feelings so that they have a role model.
- ▶ Take advantage of moments that lend themselves to a discussion of feelings, for example when watching a television show about a parent who becomes disabled.
- ▶ Be available to listen, but don't pressure a child to talk about feelings if she/he isn't willing.

Things to do when children try to express feelings:

- ▶ Give them your full attention.
- ▶ Make eye contact.
- ▶ Check out what you are hearing in their words or interpreting from their behavior. For example, "So you're really angry at your father and me because of how much of my attention he takes?" or "You've been slamming doors all night. Are you angry about something? I'm here if you want to talk."

If the feelings shared by a child arouse strong feelings in you (anger, sadness, or guilt), resist the temptation to jump in. Becoming judgmental or emotional while the child is talking can prevent them from talking more — both now and in the future. It takes great self-discipline to not get judgmental if a child is having feelings that you think they shouldn't have.

You might be tempted to say, "You shouldn't be angry with me. You should be thankful. I'm the one keeping the family together." Try not to give in to these temptations. A child needs to express their emotions, even difficult ones, in order to better understand and learn from them.



Provide your children with skills for handling strong feelings:

- ▶ Explain that feelings are neither right nor wrong. It's okay and natural for them to have the feelings they're having.
- ▶ Emphasize that talking about feelings can be helpful and that you'll always try to make special time when the child needs to talk.
- ▶ Explain that feelings do not have to control what we do. Give examples such as "It's okay that you're angry at your father and me, but the way you're acting toward us now is not okay." or "Being embarrassed about mom's illness doesn't have to stop you from explaining it to your friends."

Humor can help to make the whole communication seem positive if it isn't used to discount or ignore your children's feelings.

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE ILLNESS

Start with yourself. What are your attitudes and knowledge about the illness? The more you know, the better you'll be able to answer their questions more matter-of-factly.

The stronger your attitude that the illness is somebody's fault, the greater risk you run of saying and doing things that can make your child blame their parent or others.

Find out how the child explains their ill parent's behavior. Build on what the child says. Acknowledge any truth in what they say. Respectfully correct anything that is based on wrong information or fantasy. For example, "Daddy isn't acting this way because of anything you or I have done."

Use language and explanations that are appropriate to each child's age and

intelligence, using examples that are familiar to them. For example, you might say to a 5-year old, "Do you remember when you had the chicken pox? You cried a lot, you didn't feel like doing anything, and you were grouchy toward all of us. It wasn't because you didn't love us or wanted to be that way. It was because you didn't feel well. Right now, your mommy doesn't feel well. That's why she's crying a lot, not doing anything, and acting grouchy. She still loves you and me, but she can't show it right now."

Whereas you might tell a 10-year old, "You know how parts of our bodies get sick sometimes, like when we get stomach aches or sore throats? Well, some people get sick in the part of their brain that controls feelings. That's what's wrong with dad. He has a sickness in that part of his brain that controls feelings. This sickness has a name, and it's called manic depression."

If a child has witnessed violent or suicidal behavior, situations requiring police intervention, or any other traumatic incidents, don't underestimate how terrifying this experience can be. Explain to the child that their parent didn't know what was best for them at the time, and explain how the doctors/police/whomever are going to help their parent.

Children learn from what they see others doing, so try to behave, speak, and have the same kind of attitude you would like to see in them.

HELPING CHILDREN FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES

Children, like adults, get angry when something unfair happens to them. At some point, children will probably ask themselves, "Why did this have to happen to me/our family?" You can help by making sure they understand that life is unfair sometimes and gives no "guarantees," and remind them that



they did nothing to deserve this problem.

Children of ill parents worry that they will inherit the illness — especially if the parent's illness involves feelings, thoughts, or behavior. They need lots of reassurance that they are "normal" or okay. If they do have a problem, they need to know that many other people have problems, too. All problems can be discussed, and most problems can be solved or at least managed.

Make sure a child understands that they aren't "bad" or "sick" if they have unpleasant feelings like anger, jealousy, sadness, fear, or embarrassment. These feelings come and go in everyone. It helps to talk about them with someone they trust.

Having more information often helps people cope better and reduces negative feelings.

There are many advantages to explaining the illness to children and answering their questions:

- ▶ Children often imagine things that are worse than reality. The truth is often not as bad as they fear.
- ▶ Being honest with children helps them trust you.
- ▶ Understanding that there's an illness involved can help children feel for and respect their ill parent.

- ▶ Understanding can also help reduce their anger and guilt about what has happened.
- ▶ Being informed also lessens the risk of any anger and mistrust a child might feel if left to discover on their own the ways that their family life differs from their friends during episodes of illness.
- ▶ Being informed also lessens some of the vulnerability, sensitivity, confusion, and surprise a child might feel when confronted with negative comments from others about their ill parent.

HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SAFE AND SECURE

During stressful times in a family, children need reassurance that someone will take care of them. Here are some ways to help children feel more confident and assured of their safety and stability.

A consistent routine helps children feel safe. The more predictable and structured the environment, the better most children will feel. Explain to children that sometimes talking can help and keeping things in can make one feel worse. Help children identify which adults and which friends they trust and like to talk to when they are feeling upset. Encourage them to talk to these people. (If they choose you, try to be a good, nonjudgmental listener.)



Make sure children know what to do and who to call if they don't feel safe, especially if they are children of a single parent who is ill or if their ill parent has a history of violence or suicide attempts.

Encourage them to tell you or someone they trust whenever something happens that upsets or scares them.

Just like you would prepare a child for what to do in case of a fire or being approached by a stranger, tell them exactly who to call and where to go if something happens that scares them when they are alone with their ill parent and they can't reach you.

"Go to every neighbor we know until you find someone who is home. Ask them if you can use their phone. Call the phone numbers I've given you until you reach someone. That person will tell you what to do next. Stay with the neighbor until you reach someone on the list, and you know what to do."

Children who have lived in very stressful situations are often tense and watchful in order to detect early signs of trouble or danger.

Make sure the child knows it is okay to relax, have fun, and feel good, even if their parent is ill or things are stressful at home.

Explain to the child that even though their parent may have done or said things that hurt them, **their parent loves them very much**, does not mean to hurt them, and is very sorry.

Ask children what they do to feel better when they are feeling upset, scared, hopeless, or unsafe. If they are coping in ways you think are destructive, help them figure out better ways. School guidance counselors or mental health professionals are other resources for helping them develop healthy coping strategies.

HELPING CHILDREN LEARN EFFECTIVE VERBAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

Here are some practical suggestions for ways a child can respond to the ill parent:

- ▶ Share any of the discoveries or skills you have learned about what works and doesn't work in dealing with the ill parent. For example, "I know it's upsetting when mommy talks about the food being poisoned, but arguing with her about it doesn't help."
- ▶ Make sure the child understands that even though their parent is ill, it's okay for them to protect themselves from any behavior that seems scary or dangerous.
- ▶ Give specific suggestions for how to protect themselves. You may want to make a rule that the child tells you whenever a situation involving their ill parent has scared them or made them uncomfortable. Teach the child to tell the ill parent whenever she/he is scaring or upsetting them.
- ▶ Let a child know that showing their ill parent they still love him/her is very important. Consistently discipline your children for acting disrespectful to their ill parent or you.

Here are some practical suggestions for responding to others about the ill parent:

- ▶ Asking or expecting children to keep the illness a secret can be extremely burdensome to them.
- ▶ What you say and do with others regarding the illness will probably influence the child more than anything you tell them to do.
- ▶ Explain to the child that many people don't understand the illness, and it may scare them; they may try to make fun of it; they may have ideas that aren't true; or they may change the subject or say nothing.
- ▶ Teach a child how to explain the illness to others. The more children understand, the easier it will be for them to explain to others.
- ▶ Practice with them how they might respond to questions or comments.

Children of any age can be cruel to each other, so it is important to prepare a child to deal with teasing from other children.

How you and other adults behave will influence children more than anything you "tell" them to do, so try to be a good role model for matter-of-fact communication about the illness.

Explain to children that even though other families may have mental illnesses too, many people still don't understand that a mental illness is really an illness, not just somebody acting crazy on purpose. Help a child realize that when they try to talk about their parent's illness, other children (and even adults) may make fun of it, may have ideas that aren't true, or may not know what to say.

Practice with them what they might say to help people understand the illness and stop

teasing. "My dad does that because he is sick. I wouldn't make fun of your dad if he was sick. Please don't make fun of mine."

"If you really understood what is wrong with my mother, I don't think you'd say that. She has an illness that makes her do that. She's taking medicine and trying to get better. It's really hard for me, so please don't tease me about it."

Encourage children to ask questions. Let them know you think questions are good, even if there aren't always answers. By encouraging discussion, you will be helping to keep the lines of communication open.

RESPONSES TO SOME COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why is my mom/dad acting this way? Your mom/dad has a mental illness. Mental illnesses are diseases that affect the brain, which is where we control our feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Sometimes mental illnesses can make people say things or do things that they would not normally do if they were feeling healthy.

There are many kinds of mental illness. Here are the big names doctors have for some of them: Depression, Manic Depression (or Bipolar Disorder), Schizoaffective Disorder, Schizophrenia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Panic Disorder.

If there is a diagnosis, you might want to tell the child the diagnosis in order to reinforce the idea that their parent has an illness that doctors can name.

Is this my fault? Mental illness is nobody's fault. You didn't cause your mom's/dad's illness, and you are not responsible for making it go away.



Can I “catch it” or become sick like them?

Mental illness is not like a cold. You can’t “catch” it. Just because your mom/dad has it does not mean you or I will get it. Scientists still don’t know what causes it, but they are trying to find out.

Will things stay like this? Most people who have a mental illness are helped by taking medicine, going into the hospital, or talking to people who are trained to help them.

Talk with the child about ways their parent is trying to get help or reasons why they may not be seeking help. For example, “Your dad doesn’t want to take medicine because it’s too scary for him to admit he has this illness,” or “Your mom doesn’t want to go to a doctor because she is scared the doctor will make her go into the hospital again.”

Do mom and dad still love me? Yes. Your mom/dad are acting strange/scary/remote because they are sick, not because they don’t love you anymore.

Why is this happening to me/us? Doctors don’t know why people get mental illnesses, but you are not alone. Many families have a member with a mental illness (1 in every 4),

and many of them manage to cope and stay together. There are a lot of other children who have someone in their family with mental illness, but they may be too embarrassed or scared to talk about it. Ask the child if they know any other children who have mental illness in their family.

IF YOU HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION AND YOU ARE A PARENT

You may feel isolated and alone. Maybe you feel that you will never be able to be a good parent, or you feel a sense of guilt for not being the parent you aspire to be. Perhaps you have been away from your children during periods of hospitalization. We want you to know a few things:

Your mental health diagnosis is not your fault. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges did not happen because you are a bad person. Having a mental health condition does not make you a bad or broken person. There are multiple factors that contribute to the development, symptoms, and severity of mental health challenges. Brain chemistry is different from one person to the next, and it is not something we can control.

Self-blame can intensify undesirable symptoms and take time away from self-care, focusing on your child, your wellness, and your growth.

Learn as much as you can about the diagnosis. Ask your doctor, counselor, and support outlets questions about how this condition develops, the symptoms, and treatment options. There are many good websites and organizations that advocate for and empower individuals who have had any experience with mental health challenges.

Take care of yourself! The best thing you can do for children is to keep yourself healthy! Stay away from alcohol and other drugs, strive for a healthy diet, and get some exercise every day. Pay attention to the amount of sleep you get each night. Don't isolate yourself, arrange to have time away from your children, and make friends in your neighborhood.

Get support from others. Talk to people who have had a similar experience. In addition to parenting or family support programs, mental health support groups meet in many communities and can help you connect with others who may also be parents.

Don't give up. Mental health conditions are among the most treatable diagnoses. Often, a combination of medication, therapy, self-care, and support can help maintain stability and alleviate symptoms. By finding what works for you personally, you can focus on living your best life and taking care of your children. Even in the most difficult moments, do not give up or lose hope. Support is always available, and you never have to feel alone.

According to The National Alliance on Mental Illness, millions of Americans are affected by mental health conditions every year. About 1 in 5 adults in the United States experiences mental illness in a given year. Approximately 4% of adults in the United States experience a mental illness that greatly interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.

There are over 200 forms of mental illness. Those most common are substance use disorders, anxiety disorders, and mood and personality disorders. Symptoms are usually physical, as well as emotional, and cause a shift in thinking, mood, behavior, and even inability to function.

Millions of Americans are successfully parenting children, leading healthy lives, and learning to cope and recover from mental health challenges. Treatment works and recovery is possible.

For more information and help, we recommend these resources:

Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers Association | 800-887-6422 | pmhca.org

Mental Health America | 800-969-6642
nmha.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness of PA
800-950-0500 | namipa.nami.org

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
800-223-3632 | dbsalliance.org

Mental Health Association of Pennsylvania
866-578-3659 | mhapa.org

National Crisis Text Line
Text HOME to 741741 in the United States