

HELPING CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN THERE IS MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY

INFORMATION SHEET No. 16



INFORMATION SERIES 2012

When a family member has a mental illness everyone in the family is affected, especially children and young people. Every family is different in how they cope with difficulties and it is important to talk through things that may be happening in your family to see if there is more that can be done to help.

How can you tell if a child or young person is affected?

Children and young people often have difficulty understanding what is happening when a member of the family has a mental illness, although they are likely to know that something is not right even if they have said nothing. They may have all sorts of feelings about the situation, such as feeling confused, puzzled or frightened. They might also think that what is happening is their fault.

Most children and young people tend to show they are upset rather than talk about it. Children can show their distress in many different types of behaviour either at home or school or both. Younger children may become more withdrawn or quiet, or they may misbehave more than usual. They may start behaving as though they were younger than their age. Sometimes instead of being disruptive or angry they might appear 'extra good', and act more like an adult trying to look after everyone else.

Older children and adolescents may also become withdrawn or become more rebellious. They may start to avoid coming home by staying at friends houses more frequently and there is a risk they might start using alcohol or other drugs. It is important to realise all these examples reflect that the child or young person is struggling to cope and requires support.

How much should children and young people know about mental illness?

It can be difficult to know how to talk to children and young people about mental illness. Some people believe that by speaking about it they will worry the children, and some think children are too young to know about mental illness. However, children are very aware when things are not right, and some reassurance or information, appropriate to the child's age and needs, can help them better understand what is happening.

For more information on this topic, including some suggestions about what children need to know, see the 'Family Talk' booklet. You can ask for a copy of this booklet from mental health staff.

Can children and young people visit family members who are in hospital?

Yes usually, but it is important that the visit is a positive experience for the child. This may mean delaying visits if the family member is very unwell. Please arrange visits by children and young people in advance by contacting the nurse in charge of the Unit, in case there is some reason children cannot visit on that day. When on the Unit children and young people must be accompanied by a responsible adult at all times.

What can be done to help children and young people living in a family where there is mental illness?

There are several things adults can do to help. Many are simple and practical, such as helping with household tasks, or taking children to and from school. If it is a child's parent that is unwell, it is especially important that other family members check how the child is coping, no matter what the age of the child.

Some parents with a mental illness are well able to look after their child, but in other situations the child's needs may be forgotten or ignored. Sometimes a child may be at risk of being physically or emotionally harmed.

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If mental illness interferes with a parent's ability to meet the child's needs, another caring adult can help to make sure these needs are being met. This includes the child's physical needs, for example: good nutrition, clean clothes, a safe environment and medical care for illnesses or injuries; and emotional needs for love, trust, security and self-esteem.

It is important to let the mental health staff know if there are children in the family. They can help by providing support to the whole family.



If a family member has a mental illness, does that mean the children will also develop a mental illness later in life?

Having a mental illness in the family does not necessarily mean that the children will also develop an illness. However, it is important to reduce the impact of the mental illness on a child, and to prevent emotional or other problems from developing. The most useful way to do this is to try to maintain a stable and loving environment in which the child feels safe to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns.

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What happens if there is conflict or alcohol and drug misuse in the family as well as mental illness?

If the mental illness is causing conflict or stress within the family, this may be affecting the child more than the mental illness itself. Similarly, if the mental illness is accompanied by alcohol or drug misuse, the effects on children can be increased.

The effects of having both mental health and substance misuse problems can vary for each individual, depending on the type of mental health problem they have, the substances they use, and the treatment and support they receive. If either of these problems occur, it is important that support and help is given by suitably qualified health professionals as soon as possible.

Support services and resources for children and young people

Because it is well recognised that children and young people often have worries about family members with a mental illness there are support services available. The mental health service has programs to provide support to children including the COPMI Gaining Ground program.

There is a 'Young Carers' Association in NSW, which has a helpful website: www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

There is a website called 'Reachout' with helpful information for children and young people: www.au.reachout.com

See also the brochure called; 'Books and websites for children and young people on mental health'.