



When your parent has a mental illness

A fact sheet produced by the Mental Health Information Service

"When Mum got sick and we were alone with her, we didn't know where to get help. I was nine years old. We didn't understand what was happening, and did not know who to call, except Dad, but we didn't know where he was or how to ring him. We were scared of Mum and what she might do..." "You are unsure of who to trust. You don't know who is telling the truth. You love your Mum and want to believe her, even though what she is saying sounds a bit weird. But if you don't believe your mother you feel guilty and you feel like you are deceiving her." - A young woman who from the age of nine cared for her mother, who has schizophrenia.

In Australia it is estimated that there are 27,000 children affected by having a parent who has a mental illness. (Cowling, McGorry & Hay, *Medical Journal of Australia*, 163(7), 1995:119-120)

If your parent has a mental illness

Growing up in any family can be challenging at times, but there are often special problems and challenges for families in which one or both parents have a mental illness.

What are the challenges?

You may have had to take over many of the adult responsibilities associated with parenting and managing a household. Such things might include taking care of younger brothers and sisters, grocery shopping or paying bills.

You may not always be able to receive the care and support from your parent that you need or would like. There are likely to be disruptions to the family when your parent becomes ill and needs to stay in hospital.

If you do not understand your parent's illness, and even if you do, you may feel guilty that somehow through your behaviour or the things you say, you are the reason they become ill.

If your parent has a mental illness you may be vulnerable to stigma, rejection and a lack of understanding from people at your school and in the community. Other people's shortcomings such as prejudice and fear can make you feel like isolating and withdrawing from those around you.

When a parent has a mental illness, seeking and holding down a job can be difficult. A recent survey showed that 92.06% of mentally ill parents surveyed in the South West (of Sydney) were unemployed. Being unable to get work can push the family income below the poverty line. This puts even more stress on everyone.

What might your needs be?

You may need to have someone care for you or help you look after your brothers and sisters when your parent goes into hospital to ensure the least disruption to home and school.

You may not understand what is happening at the times when your parent is ill. Finding out about your parent's illness can help you make sense of what's going on.

It is okay and important for you to talk to someone, other than to your parent about your fears, guilt and confusion.

You may need to meet and talk with other young people who also have parents who have a mental illness.

How you can help yourself

Acknowledge that you have a parent with a mental illness and acknowledge the effects this has had on you.

- Remember that you are not responsible for causing your parent's problems.
- Acknowledge your feelings of shame, guilt and anger.
- Remember you are not responsible for other people's prejudices.

Develop new ways of taking care of yourself.

- Recognise your own needs and take care of them.
- Develop strategies for coping and reducing the stress in your life.
- Have interests outside of the family.

Develop new ways of relating to others.

- Recognise that relationships don't have to be defined by crisis or dependency.

Educate yourself about your parent's illness.

- This will help you to understand what has caused the problems for your parent and family.

Consider seeing your own support person (i.e. counsellor).

- It may be good to seek help from outside the family. Counselling may aid you with an understanding of how your parent's illness impacts on your life and how you can deal with that.

Join a support group or peer support program

- A support group may enable you to reduce your feeling of isolation.
- Peer support will provide you with a support network of young people in similar circumstances. Through peer support you can also learn strategies for dealing with confusing and difficult living environments.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

- ☎ Youth Health Centres (see 'Community Help' in white pages)
- ☎ ARAFMI(02) 9805 1883
(Association for Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill)
- ☎ Young ARAFMI(02) 9427 5946
- ☎ Family Crisis Service(02) 9622 0522
- ☎ Kids Help Line (5-18 years)1800 551 800
- ☎ NSW Mental Health Information and Referral Service.....(02) 9816 5688
Or... 1800 674 200

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