Werry Workforce
WHĀRAURAU

How can I help my child?

For parents who experience mental health issues

How can I help my child?
For parents who experience mental health issues.

This guide was originally prepared by Emerging Minds for the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) national initiative. The COPMI initiative was funded by the Australian Government.

It has been adapted for NZ parents by Werry Workforce Whāraurau with the permission and support of Emerging Minds. Publication has been supported by contributions from Matua Raki and Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui.

Further resources and information can be found at supportingparentsnz.org

The content in this guide has been adapted from the 'Let's Talk About Children' materials that were originally developed in Finland by Professor Tytti Solantaus for the National Institute for Health and Welfare.

We would like to thank the parents, family and whānau, children and professionals who were involved in the guide's development. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of people who were interviewed for the development of this resource.

Published by Emerging Minds (ABN 87 093 479 022)

Reprinted 2018

ISBN: 978-0-9752124-8-6

Contents

About this guide

This guide has been prepared for parents who experience mental health issues. It is intended to give you time to think about being a parent living with mental health issues and to help you find practical ways to strengthen the social and emotional wellbeing of your child and family or whānau.

This information has been written in partnership with parents who have experienced mental health issues, their children and supporters. You and your partner should read this booklet and talk about it together. If you don't have a partner, it can be helpful to talk things through with a family or whānau member, a trusted friend or your mental health professional.

About the terms used

- We use the term 'parent experiencing mental health issues' to refer to adults who have been diagnosed with a mental health concern and those who do not have a formal mental health diagnosis.
- We use the term 'unwell' to refer to the times when mental health issues are especially challenging for parents (e.g. when they affect their day-to-day functioning and responsibilities, when they may need extra support from others to manage and when they may need to have some respite or need to go to hospital).
- When we refer to 'parents' we understand that adults raising children are not always their biological parents, but might be step-parents, partners, grandparents, foster parents or others who have caring roles in a child's life. Throughout this guide, the term 'parents' should be taken to refer to all adults who have a caring role in a child's life.
- The term 'child' is used throughout this guide, however it is acknowledged that parents might have more than one child, in which case it refers to all of their children (including teenagers and young adults).

Parenting with mental health issues

Being a parent can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. It is also a role that requires a lot of time, energy and commitment. Raising children can be challenging for all parents at times. When you are experiencing a mental health issue it can be even more stressful, and at times overwhelming.

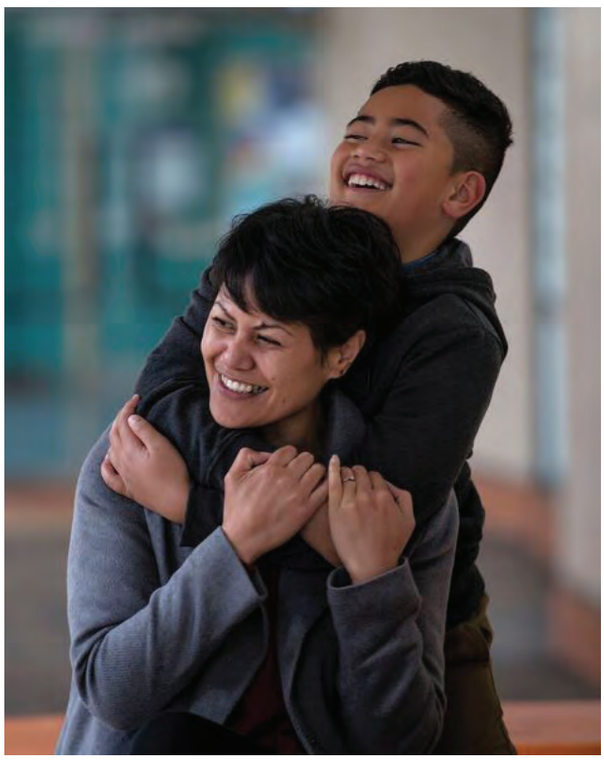
Mental health issues can impact in some way on all members of the family or whānau , not only those who are unwell. Parenting can be affected by mental health issues in many ways. For example, when you are unwell you might not have the energy or the patience you would like or that your child needs.

When you are unwell you might not feel you are parenting as well as you would like. You might feel guilty about this and worry about your child and how to support them. It is very common for parents to feel this way!

An awareness of your child's strengths and challenges and how to reduce these challenges can strengthen your relationship with your child. It can also support your child's social and emotional development and their ability to cope now and into the future.

This guide helps you to reflect on your family's strengths. It also helps you to consider the changes that you can make to reduce challenges within your family or whānau.

It is best if the activities in this guide are completed when you are feeling well or with the support of a family or whānau member, support person or a local health professional.



This guide

This guide provides parenting tips that can help children of parents who experience mental health issues. Further information can be found on the Supporting Parents Healthy Children website:

www.supportingparentsnz.org

Strong family and whānau relationships

Your child's relationships with people around them (most importantly with you and other family or whānau members) directly affects their day-to-day wellbeing. When these relationships are strong and supportive, it builds their resilience to the stress caused by life's challenges.

It is important when you are unwell (as it is when you are well) to focus on your relationship with your child. This includes showing affection, being interested in their day-to-day life and sharing time together. This helps your child to feel secure, safe, loved, emotionally connected and valued.

Keeping connected when you are unwell

Parenting requires a lot of time and energy. It can be hard to meet all of your child's needs. If you are unwell this can be more difficult. It is helpful to think about ways you can still connect with your child.

These ideas may help:

- Make time to give your child a chance to talk with you about their day. Explain why this is the best time for you to talk and absorb things.
- If you are finding it hard to talk, explain that you would like to have time just listening, and that you may not 'have the energy to talk a lot today'.
- It can be good to ask young children to draw a picture of their day or the important things that happen to them, or to ask older children to take a photo on their mobile phone. You can discuss or view these together later. This can help to keep you connected with their experiences and is a great way to hear about what is important to them.
- Ask your child to read or tell you a story if you are feeling exhausted or finding it hard to talk. It allows you to share time together.
- As you start to feel better, try to spend more one-on-one time with your child.
- During these times, find ways to talk with your child about their day and connect with how they are feeling.

If you are worried about your relationship with your child, speak to your mental health professional and ask them for information about what you can do or who can help.

When you are in respite or hospital

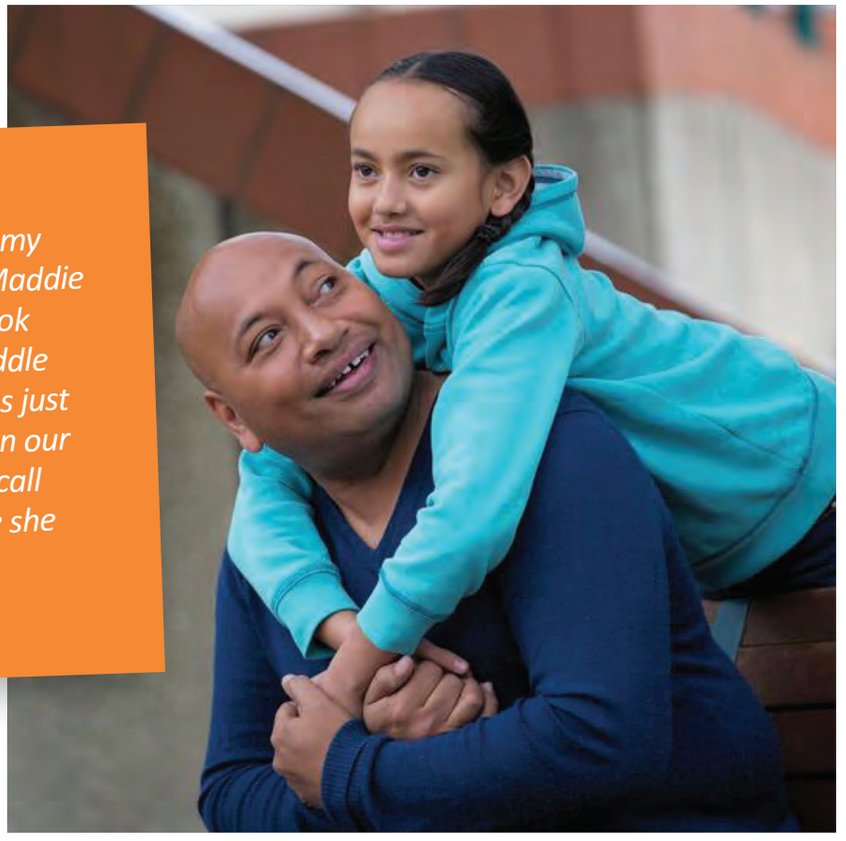
If you are unwell and need time in respite or hospital, it is important for you to stay connected with your child. You can talk to your mental health team about how you could do this.

Here are some ideas:

- Send a message. Ask your family or whānau or the staff to send a message to your child or send a text message from your mobile phone.
- Send a letter/email or ask family or whānau or staff to help you write one.
- Arrange a phone call or video call.
- Plan a visit with your child at a time when it suits you both. There might be a family or whānau room where you can spend time together.
- Arrange for leave from hospital to do a family or whānau activity or to spend quiet time at home with your child and family or whānau.

"When I was in the depths of my depression and exhaustion, Maddie would come in and read a book to me and then we would cuddle afterwards. It was a way of us just having some time together on our own. Tim (her father) would call it 'tucking Mummy in' before she went to bed."

Lisa, parent



Your writing space

What are your favourite things to do as a family or whānau? What do you think your child would say they enjoy the most?

When you are unwell, what things can you still do together with your child to help them feel secure and loved?

How can you plan for these times? Who can support you to make these plans?

Family or whānau activities

Spending time and having fun as a family or whānau are simple ways to strengthen your relationships and your child's wellbeing. It is the simple things that can make a difference, like reading stories, having meals together, chatting in the car or taking a family or whānau walk or outing.

Balancing family/whānau time

When you are a parent, you often devote most of your time to looking after your family or whānau and their needs, without stopping to consider your own needs. Finding a healthy balance is important.

In the same way, there are also benefits for your child in connecting with people outside of the family or whānau. It is good to organise for your child to spend time with others outside the home, whether it is with a grandparent, aunty or uncle, other relatives or friends. It could be for a few hours, or even longer.

Peer support groups can help

Many children of parents who experience mental health issues have expressed how helpful peer support groups have been. Peer support groups provide the opportunity for people to share their experiences, support each other and take time out.

For details of peer support groups in your area, talk to your mental health team or the Supporting Families NZ mental health team.

Support groups

To find out about any support groups in your area, speak to your local health professional or visit the Supporting Families NZ website:

www.supportingfamilies.org.nz

Encourage activities outside of the home

It is important to help your child to experience success at school, but also in leisure and social activities. Encouraging your child to pursue different interests gives them the opportunity to make friends, develop their confidence, strengthen their social skills and connect with others in the community.

Tips:

- Help your child to thrive at childcare, pre-school or school by encouraging healthy routines (e.g. getting adequate sleep, eating nutritious food for energy and concentration) and getting them involved in different activities.
- Find some safe, free or inexpensive activities in the local community (e.g. visit playgrounds, parks, libraries, clubs and groups).
- Think about ways to keep your child involved in activities when you are unwell (e.g. getting help from family or whānau or friends to get them to regular activities).
- Consider talking to your child's school about how they are progressing and ways the school can support them.

Talking to your child's school

Consider talking to your child's school about how they are progressing and ways the school can support them.

www.copmi.net.au/school-talk

Maintaining routines

A predictable daily routine with things that are familiar can help to give your child a sense of security. When you are unwell, simple daily rituals can help (e.g. reading a story each night or tucking them into bed). If this is too much for you, ask someone else to do this (e.g. your partner or another trusted adult in your child's life).

Your writing space

What is your child's regular routine on weekdays and weekends?

What are the important activities in your child's life?

How can these be maintained when things get tough? Who else can help?

Household chores

Every household has its own way of managing chores. When you are unwell it can be very hard to stay on top of these. Talking about chores as a family or whānau and negotiating who will do things when you are unwell is important.

If your child is taking on a range of extra responsibilities that get in the way of childhood activities, you can:

- seek support from family or whānau members or friends
- find ways to reduce your child's load.

Is your child taking on extra responsibility?

Does your child take on extra things to help you such as:

- cooking or cleaning
- helping you with medication or appointments
- checking on your wellbeing to make sure you are okay?

> *"We talked about how we would split the chores and get my sister to take the kids to basketball if I was unwell."*
>
> ***Emma, parent***

Changing roles and routines

As you feel better, it is good to let your child know when you can cope with household chores again. If you find your child is reluctant or uneasy about this, it can help to talk to them about wanting to step back into your role as a parent and the importance of this to you. Remember to thank your child. Tell them you would like them to spend more time being a kid.
As they see you gradually take back more tasks, they will probably feel more confident about letting go of household chores.

It is important to tell your child about how you are feeling and that being a parent is important to you. Keep checking in with them about how they are feeling.

"The kids were an incredible help. When I was feeling better I reminded them that they are kids and it was okay for them to be kids."

Jeremy, parent

Your writing space

When you are unwell, what extra chores does your child pick up?

How do chores affect your child's activities?

Who else can help with the chores, so that your child can spend time being a kid?

What can you do to check in with family or whānau members to make sure they are okay?

Managing conflict

Conflict happens in families, particularly when you are unwell. Left unresolved, conflict can affect your relationship with your child.

Things that can help prevent or manage conflict when you are unwell include:

- Being aware of how your mental health might affect your behaviour in stressful situations (e.g. short temper, withdrawn, sad).
- Talking as a family or whānau about how you can address and resolve conflict in a helpful way. Don't do this in the middle of an argument.
- Creating a family or whānau language that can be used to check on your mental health and your level of stress. This can also help individuals to express what they are seeing or what is worrying them.
- Encouraging family or whānau members to express their feelings about what it is like for them when you are not well.
- Anticipating that there may be conflict when you are unwell (or when there are changes in roles, relationships and responsibilities) and having a plan to manage it.
- Making sure that your child has someone else to talk to if they are feeling stressed or concerned (e.g. family or whānau, friends or a professional).
- Remembering to say sorry if your behaviour has caused conflict.

Learn more

For more information about how to deal with conflict and how to problem-solve as a family or whānau, visit the Raising Children Network website.

www.raisingchildren.net.au

"I developed a bit of a language around my level of stress with my kids. I tend to get more stressed out depending on how rowdy they are. So I explained to them that a 10 meant I was going to blow up, and I'd tell them when I was at a 6 or 7 (for example). It was a bit of an indication to them of where I was at so they knew to tone it down for a bit until I was under control."

Terry, parent

When things get tough

Every parent and family or whānau needs help sometimes. If you feel like you are struggling, ask for help.

Here are some tips:

- Think about practical things that will help you and your child. Consider the people in your life who could help (e.g. relatives, friends or community groups).
- Talk with them about what you might need. Be honest about what will really help. Let them know when and how they can assist, including how long you might need their support for.
- Talk to a health professional about how your experiences or medication affect your parenting.
- Find out about the support and services in your local area (they are different in each part of the country).
- Think about who can help with these tips.

Remember:

- Asking for help is a sign of courage and strength!
- Your child can learn by observing you and seeing how important it is to look for and accept help when it is needed – making you a powerful role model.

Support services

A list of helpful support services can be found at the back of this guide on page 25.

Taking care of your family or whānau

A lot of parents who experience mental health issues find there are times when they are well, unwell or periods of 'crisis'. They may feel they can't cope and need extra support or emergency help. It may be decided that you need to spend some time in respite or hospital.

It can help your child and family or whānau to be prepared for these times by creating a care plan. This is a plan that lets others know what your family or whānau's wishes are when things get tough.

A care plan is not a legally binding document. It outlines your family or whānau's preferences to maintain the predictability and familiarity of everyday routines that your child needs to feel safe and secure.

"My kids felt more secure once we had a care plan in place in case I went to hospital again."

Sarah, parent

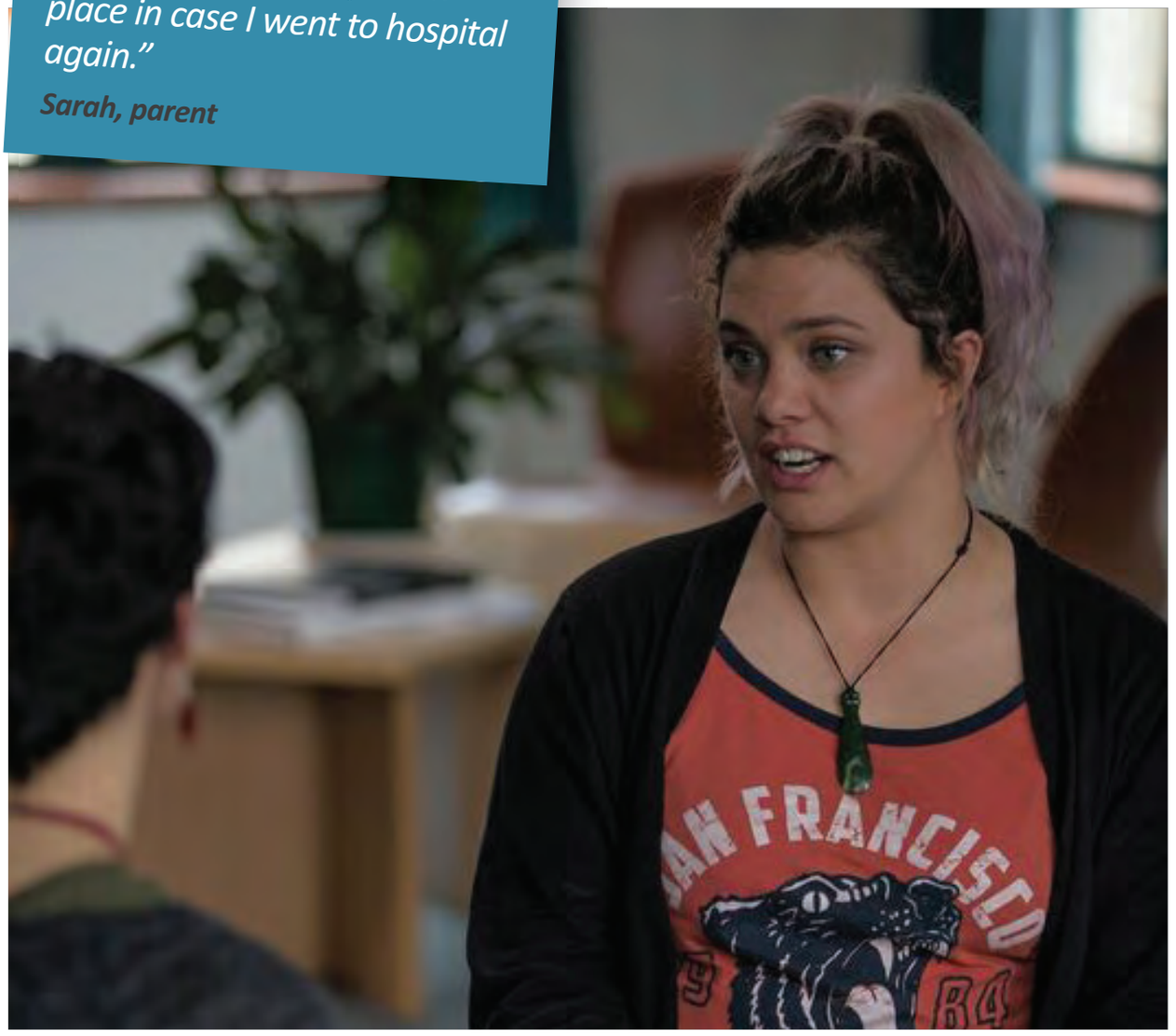
The care plan should detail:

- Your child's relationships and routines.
- How others can help to maintain your child's relationships and routines.
- How it is best to stay in touch with your child when you are receiving treatment in respite or hospital.
- What your child is told about your mental health issues.

Write a care plan when you are well with someone close to you. This could be your partner, a family or whānau member or a mental health professional.

Care plan templates are available from:

http://www.copmi.net.au/parents/helping-my-child-and-family/care-plans



Helping your child to understand

A powerful way to support your child and family or whānau is to help them to understand your mental health issues.

Talking to your child about your mental health issues

Research shows that when parents talk openly about their mental health issues with their child, in language they can understand, it helps them to make sense of what is happening in the family or whānau.

Talking openly about mental health issues with your child can:

- help them to know that it is okay to talk about mental health issues
- allow them to ask questions and get the correct information
- help them to come to you (or others) when they are worried or feel overwhelmed
- strengthen your relationship
- challenge stigma.

Developing your own understanding

Most parents find it difficult to talk about their mental health issues. They don't know what to say to their child, or how to explain what is going on for them.

There are a lot of booklets, fact sheets and websites that you can browse for ideas to help you and your child to understand more about mental health issues and how you can talk together as a family or whānau.

A good starting point might be COPMI's 'About mental health issues' videos for young people. You can watch these with your child and use them to start conversations:

www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness

Getting started

Discuss your mental health issues with your health professional. Ask how you can explain it to others.

You can access information about mental health issues at:

www.mentalhealth.org.nz

Thinking about how your mental health issues affect you and those around you

An important first step in preparing to have conversations with your child is to think about:

- the way that your mental health issues impact on your life
- what your child sees and hears
- how your child may feel.

Do this with a partner, a friend or a health professional. They may have observed the impact of your mental health issues from a different perspective.

List the things about your mental health issues that worry you. Focus on those that have the biggest impact on you as a parent.

What do you think your child sees, hears and feels when you are stressed or unwell?

Identifying triggers

Everyone will have their own 'triggers' or situations that can cause stress and lead to mental health issues getting worse. Recognising what your own triggers are can help you to understand your mental health issues. It can also be useful to speak to your family or whānau, as it is often the people closest to you that notice your triggers and the early changes in your behaviour first. Having a shared language about this, can help your child feel comfortable to raise what is worrying them.

Common triggers can include:

- Poor sleep
- Significant life changes (e.g. having a baby, moving house, changing jobs)
- Financial pressures
- Loss or grief
- Relationship problems
- An unpleasant experience where you might have felt disappointed in yourself or criticised by others
- Certain times of the year (e.g. particular seasons, anniversary of events)
- Health concerns for you or a family or whānau member
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Changes in your treatment plan or medication
- Specific situations (e.g. going into a busy public place).

"Well we know now when Mum's in the danger zone. She doesn't sleep properly and starts to get 'narky' with everyone. It's how we know that we need to check on her stress levels and get her some support."

Sarah, child

Your writing space

Think about specific situations that you find stressful and have triggered your mental health issues in the past.

Strategies that help your mental health

Think about the things that have been helpful when you have started to feel unwell. Sharing these with your family or whānau will help them to understand the strategies you need to put into place to feel better.

Some examples might include:

- Talking with a friend, loved one or your health care professional.
- Going for a walk outside.
- Doing an activity that you enjoy.
- Writing or drawing to help express your feelings and thoughts.
- Spending time on a hobby.
- Going to a peer support group.
- Exercising.
- Cutting back on the responsibilities that are not essential.

Your writing space

List the strategies that can help your mental health.

Do you need support for your child while you put the strategies in place?

Who can support you?

Family or whānau recovery

Recovery will mean different things to different people. For some people, recovery may mean feeling empowered to achieve the best quality of life they can when experiencing some mental health issues. For others, recovery will mean an opportunity to strengthen relationships and make positive changes to their life and priorities.

It is important to view recovery as a family or whānau process as much as it is an individual process.

Your writing space

What does recovery mean to you? What is important in your own recovery?

What does recovery mean to your family or whānau? What would be important in your family or whānau's recovery?

What would help you and your family or **whānau** *to understand recovery? Check out the 'Getting better' video at:* **www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness**.

Your child's understanding

Children of different ages and stages of development will make sense out of what they observe of you and your behaviour and draw their own conclusions from it.

Think about the situation from your child's point of view. What might they have noticed about your mental health issues and how might they make sense of them?

Identify your child's age and developmental stage and use the writing spaces provided to help you consider this.

Babies

Babies might not understand what you say, however they are very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions, your baby also seems more restless.

You don't need to explain your mental health issues to your baby, but your baby will be aware of your mood and behaviour.

Think about a moment when you have been unwell and with your baby:

- What do you think your baby saw when they were looking into your face and listening to your voice?
- What did you notice about your baby's reaction to you?
- What can you do differently?

Your writing space

Toddlers and pre-schoolers

Toddlers and pre-schoolers use their parent's face and tone of voice, along with their increasing understanding of language to make sense of their experiences.

Thinking about how your mental health issues impact on your life:

- What might your toddler or pre-schooler see in your face and feel in your interactions?
- What might they hear in your tone of voice?
- What might they understand in the language you use?
- What behaviour do you think might worry your toddler?
- What could you do differently?

Your writing space

Primary school age children

Children at this age are very perceptive and pick up on even the smallest changes in their parent's behaviour or body language (despite attempts to 'hide' them).

They tend to believe they are somehow at fault for their parent's behaviour, and can feel responsible for making their parent feel better.

Thinking about how your mental health issues impact on your life:

- What might your child have noticed?
- How might they have made sense of this?
- What have you noticed about their reaction to your mental health issues?
- What do you think they might be feeling?
- How might they feel about how you talk to them?
- What behaviour do you think might worry your child the most?
- What can you do differently?

Your writing space

Teenagers

Relationships with teenagers are complex. Teenagers are developing an adult view of the world. They are trying to make sense of their relationships with you and with others. Your behaviour may challenge how they see you and how they see themselves. It is common for teenagers to worry about you and your mental health issues and how this affects their relationship with you.

Your teenager can understand more factual and complex information than younger children. They are usually better able to express their feelings and thoughts. They may want to know how you were diagnosed and whether you will get better. Some teenagers worry about whether they will develop a mental health issue. They may want to know how to explain your mental health issues to others without feeling like they are being disrespectful or disloyal to you.

Thinking about how your mental health issues impact on your life:

- How might your behaviour be affecting your teenager?
- How might your mental health issues impact on your relationship with your teenager?
- Which behaviour appears to be the most challenging for them?
- What do you think they might be feeling?
- How might this affect your teenager's involvement with community activities, friends or peers?
- How might your mental health issues be affecting their decisions?
- What concerns might your teenager have about their own mental health?
- What information could help your teenager to understand what they have observed about your behaviour?
- What can you do differently?

Your writing space

Starting the conversation

What to expect

Your child's need for information will change as they grow. For this reason, it is helpful to think about the idea of starting with an initial discussion that will lead to other talks in an ongoing way over time.

Children are often pleased to learn that it is not their fault and that you are getting help and are safe.

Where and when to start

It can be good to think about where and when you want to have the conversation. It should be at a time that you and your child feel safe and comfortable and preferably where you won't be disturbed.

Tips:

- Discuss what is happening to you and how it affects you. Remember there is no need to share everything (you can decide how much to tell your child). Talking through what to say with your partner, a good friend or your mental health professional can be helpful.
- Consider your child's age and ability to understand the information you give them to ensure they feel relaxed and can understand the conversation.
- Think about the language you use. Medical explanations for mental health issues should be simple and easy for your child to understand.
- Be clear that it is not their fault and it is not their responsibility to make you feel better.
- Ask about their fears and worries and then make plans to address them.
- Be reassuring and remind your child that you care about them and are getting help. It is important that your child knows there is a plan to make sure their needs will be met.
- Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. Set up a process so that if you are too unwell or don't have the energy, they still feel valued and know there will be a time when you can talk.

Getting started

You might start a conversation with:

'You may have been worried about...or noticed... '

'I want you to know I have been experiencing some mental health issues. You have not caused this, it is not your fault.'

You might invite your child to talk about what they have noticed or are worried about:

'What have you noticed?'

or

'I am here to talk to if you have any questions or are worried.'

'If you feel you can't come to me, you can talk to...'

An example:

'You might have noticed I do not seem to have much energy and I am always tired. Being tired is a symptom of my mental health issue. I want you to know you have not caused this and it is not your fault. I don't like feeling like this and it must be hard for you to understand when you see me tired and sleeping a lot.'

Tips to remember:

- Often the first discussion is the most daunting
- Talk to your child at their level, use words they will understand
- Stop and pause after each new bit of information
- Give your child time to think and to ask questions
- If you do not know the answer tell them and say you will find out, or maybe you can find out together
- One discussion is never enough – a shared understanding takes time and your child's questions and need for information will change as they grow
- Small conversations can build on your child's and your family or whānau's shared understanding over time
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you cannot answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust.

Additional support

Other trusted adults can be helpful when attempting to explain your experiences to your child. Consider grandparents, other family or whānau members or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Tell them what information you have given to your child and the information that you would like them to share with your child. Ask them to tell you if they are worried about your child.

When you are worried about your child

Parents worry about their child, particularly when they express feelings like anger, sadness, frustration or anxiety. It is healthy for children to express a range of emotions.

You know your child better than anyone else. If you are worried about their emotional health, consider talking to a doctor or mental health professional.

It is important to seek help for your child if they are:

- regularly upset or anxious
- difficult to comfort or having problems that seem to be getting worse
- showing sudden changes in usual behaviour that last longer than two weeks (or involved hurting themselves or other people)
- having emotional problems that get in the way of their daily routines and activities
- having problems with eating, sleeping, concentrating or doing usual tasks like school work or attending regular social or family or whānau activities
- developing slower than you think they should.

Who can support you if you're worried about your child?

A partner, family or whānau member or friend may be able to support you to seek help for your child.

Who can help?

Initially contact a health professional such as your doctor. They can recommend a range of services available to support you and your child.

It is important to remember that you, your child and family or whānau are not alone. There is a lot of support available for you and a number of ways to get it if you need it. Explore the best options for you with a health professional.

www.copmi.net.au/worried

A final note

By reading this guide you have already taken an important first step. With a better understanding of your mental health and ways to support your child, you will strengthen your relationship with your child and also support their social and emotional wellbeing.

Helpful information and contacts

Family/whānau care plan

A family/whānau care plan is designed to be completed by parents together with someone who knows them well, such as a partner, family member or mental health professional. It is best to work on this when a parent is well:

supportingparents.nz.org

How to get support

Contact your local mental health professional, community health service or GP. Ask them about services available in your area that could help you and your family or whānau. Services vary a lot from place to place, so asking someone with local knowledge is best.

Useful helplines

Depression Helpline: 0800 111 757 or text 4202
Alcohol and Drug Helpline: 0800 787 797 or text 8681
Gambling Helpline: 0800 654 655 or text 8006
Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865
Youthline: 0800 376 633
Kidsline (up to 18 years old): 0800 543 754
What's Up (for 5-18 year olds): 0800 942 8787 or text 5626
Carers NZ Helpline: 0800 777 797

Parent helplines

For information, counselling and support.

Parent Help	0800 568 856
Family Services 211 Helpline	0800 211 211

Useful websites

supportingparentsnz.org – information and resources for parents, young people and professionals regarding supporting families/whānau where a parent is experiencing mental health issues.

www.mentalhealth.org.nz – the Mental Health Foundation of NZ – provides information, resources, advice on self-help, and a guide to where to get supports.

depression.org.nz – helping people find a way through depression.

thelowdown.co.nz – support to help young people recognise and understand depression or anxiety.

depression.org.nz/get-better/the-journal/ – an online programme to help people learn skills to tackle depression.

facebook.com/youngcarersnz – a national and support network for children and young people in caring roles.

familyservices.govt.nz/directory – a directory of service providers for families or whānau.

grg.org.nz – provides support services to grandparents who are raising their grandchildren on a full time basis.

skylight.org.nz – a national not for profit trust that enables children, young people and their family or whānau to navigate through times of trauma loss and grief and difficult life situations.

Your writing space

Your writing space

Werry Workforce
WHĀRAURAU

www.supportingparentsnz.org