



## Helping Children Cope

The presence of a serious medical illness affects everyone in the family. Family and friends may rally around. Help is offered and taken. The normal routines of life are disrupted; roles change, uncertainty, and fearfulness may surround the present and cloud the future.

This is no less true when the illness is a mood disorder.

However, there is still a lot of shame and stigma surrounding mental illnesses. The way families respond may be very different. Mental illness is not easily talked about and may be treated like a shameful 'family secret'. Families can become isolated from friends and neighbours as they try to cope with a mental illness alone.

### How are children affected?

- Children often feel 'forgotten' or are confused when left to figure things out on their own.
- They may secretly fear that they were the cause of their parent's illness, and think that if they just behave, "mommy will be happy again."
- Some children take on more 'care giving' responsibilities than is good for them to help the family function.
- Some children feel powerless when decisions are made without their involvement.
- Other children throw themselves into schoolwork as a way of shifting the focus onto that which they can control. While this can help some kids cope, they may become cut off from how they are feeling.
- Children may also become isolated from their friends as they hold the family 'secret' or are embarrassed or confused by of their parents behaviour.
- Some teens 'act out' in school or use alcohol and drugs as a way to ease the pain or to draw parental attention.

### Mental illness can seem scary.

People who are ill with depression and manic depression may behave in ways that can be frightening, confusing, or hurtful to children. They may

say things that they would normally not say or behave in embarrassing ways.

Children know something is wrong. They can feel it. Their once happy and involved parent may now be withdrawn and irritable spending all their days in bed. Harsh words may be spoken or worse yet no words at all. These illnesses can be very hard for children to understand.

### **Children need accurate, honest information.**

Children need accurate information about what is going on and why. However, think carefully about the amount of information you share and the level of detail. Match your information to what the child wants to know, their age and level of maturity.

Some important key messages children need to hear are:

- This is medical illness.
- With treatment and support, their parent will get better.
- They did not cause this illness to happen.
- They cannot make the illness better.
- Mood disorders affects the way a person thinks, feels, and behaves.
- Remind the child that it is the 'illness' speaking not their parent when they say hurtful or frightening things.

### **What helps children cope?**

#### **Reassure them they are loved.**

During stressful times, when parental attention is drawn away from the child by illness, they may fear that they are not loved. Take time to let them know they are loved and how important they are in the family. Take time to be with them. Reassure them that what is happening is not their fault and that the sadness, irritability, and anger are caused by the illness. Make special 'alone' time for your child even if it is only for a few minutes.

### **Encourage children to be children**

Children need to be given permission to get on with the important tasks of their life.

- Encourage them to focus on the important tasks of their life like friends, school, and sports.
- Support their participation in school-based and extracurricular activities. Physical activities like sports help kids cope better with stress.
- Be careful not to rely on children for the support you are use to getting from your partner.
- If you need more support, use your friends, join a self-help group, or seek professional counselling.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Set rules and limits for your children. Children feel safer when there is predictable structure and reasonable rules.
- Take time to do fun/normal things together as a family.
- Take care not to involve children in adult problems.

### **Involve others in building support**

Those children who enjoy a broad base of family supports and friendship to draw on are able to adjust to the presence of mood disorders better. Research tells us those children who enjoy a trusting relationship, even with just one caring adult, are better able to cope with difficulties. Stay in touch with child care providers and teacher. Let them know it is a challenging time for the family. Ask them to let you know if there are problems with your child.

During periods of illness when your time and attention is limited consider asking family members, or family friends to help by spend some time with your children. The extra support during difficult times will help everyone.

### **Let them share how they feel**

Children may need to be gently encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings. They may be more willing to open up when you are involved in doing tasks together like making supper, driving to soccer, or doing the dishes. Let them know it is OK to feel angry, confused, or upset by the illness. These feelings are normal. Children may need to grieve the absence of the 'well' parent and feel angry that their parent is ill.

- Listen for cues and clues that tell you how they are feeling.
- Be a good listener. Listen to understand. Do not try to argue them out of how they feel.
- Try to see things through the eyes of the child. Reflect back what they say to show you understand.
- Help them build an understanding of the illness over time.
- Short conversation may be easier for children to absorb.

### **Will my dad/mom ever get better?**

Children may become worried that their parent may never get well. They need your assurance that things will get better. Let them know you are getting medical help and that with treatment the illness will go away. Treatment can include medications, and talk therapy. Sometimes, the illness will come back but it can be treated again.

### **Recommended readings**

*Can I Catch It like a Cold? A Story to Help Children Understand a Parent's Depression.* Story by Gretchen Kelbaugh and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health; illustrated by Coral Nault.

[Sad Days, Glad Days:](#) by Dewitt Hamilton, Dewitt Hamilton and illustrated by Gail Owens.

*When You Wish Upon A Star* by Nancy Marie.