

When a Parent Has Mental Illness

Helping Children Cope



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Some basic questions children may be asking themselves (either consciously or unconsciously) when a parent shows symptoms of mental illness:

- Why is Dad acting this way?
- Is this my fault?
- Will things stay like this?
- Do Mom and Dad still love me?
- What will happen to me if our family falls apart?
- What will happen to me, will I get this illness?

Helping children to understand the illness and develop healthy attitudes:
Some advantages to explaining the illness to children include:

- Children often imagine that things are worse than they really are.
- Being honest with children helps them to trust you.
- Understanding that there is an illness involved can help the child empathize with and respect the ill parent.
- Possibly reducing some of the anger and guilt about what is happening.
- Reducing any anger and mistrust toward you if left to discover on their own the ways that their family life differs from their friends' during episodes of the illness.
- Reducing some of their vulnerability, sensitivity, confusion and surprise when confronted with negative comments from others about their ill parent.
- Research indicates that information aids coping.

Tips for explaining the illness to children:

Start with yourself. Assess your attitudes and knowledge about the illness. The more you know, the better you can answer the questions matter-of-factly. The more you believe that the illness is somebody's fault, the greater risk you run of saying and doing things that can put your children in a loyalty conflict.

Example: "Mom says it's Dad's fault. Dad says it's Mom's fault. Whose side should I take?"

Teach children not to blame others when bad things happen.

Find out and try to understand how they explain their ill parent's behaviour. Build on what they say. Acknowledge any truth in what they say. Respectfully correct anything that is based on wrong information or fantasy.

Example: "Daddy isn't acting this way because of anything you or I have done."

Use language and an explanation that is appropriate to each child's age and intelligence. Use familiar examples.

Example (for a five year-old): "Do you remember when you had the chickenpox? 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, but because you didn't feel good. Well, right now Mommy doesn't feel good. 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."

Example (for a ten 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 brains that controls feelings. That's what is wrong with Dad. He has a sickness in that part of his brain that controls feelings. This sickness has a name. It's called schizophrenia."

If a child has seen violent or suicidal behaviour, situations requiring police intervention or any other traumatic incidents, don't underestimate how terrifying the experience can be. The following is an example of an explanation for any forcible removal of a parent from the home.

Example: "Daddy didn't know just then what was best for him. He didn't know that the hospital is the safest place to be in while he is getting well. You know, there were times when you too had to do things you didn't want to, but which we knew were good for you. It was that way with Daddy, too. Other people needed to decide what was best for him."

Find out if there are any community agencies available to help your child. Children usually learn more from what their parents do than from what their parents say. Try as much as possible to practice using whatever information or attitudes you are telling them to use.

As your child's role model, be matter-of-fact when talking with others about the illness or relating to your ill spouse. Be a good role model by protecting yourself from unacceptable behaviour even though your spouse's behaviour is illness based. If you can be firm and clear about your need to set limits on their ill parent, it may help them through any temporary distress and teach them that marriage does not mean sacrificing one's safety.

Helping children with their feelings:

Predominant feelings may vary depending on a child's age and level of understanding.

Guilt or fear are often the predominant feelings for younger children. Anger and embarrassment tend to be common for most adolescents.

Create an atmosphere that encourages children to talk about their feelings:

- Talk about your own feelings so that they have a role model.
- Take advantage of moments that provide an opportunity for discussion of feelings.

Example: *Watching a TV show about a parent who becomes disabled, may be an opportunity for discussion. Be available to listen, but don't pressure a child to talk about feelings if he is not willing.*

When your children do try to express feelings:

- Give your full attention. Make eye contact.
- Check out what you are hearing in their words or interpreting from their behaviour.

Example: *Don't say, "So you're really angry at your father and me because of how much of my attention he takes?" Instead, you could say, "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 your children arouse strong feelings in you (i.e. anger, sadness, guilt), resist the temptation to join in the conversation. Getting judgmental or emotional might stop them from talking, now and in the future. It is very difficult not to judge your children's feelings if you don't agree with them.

Example: *Don't say, "You shouldn't be angry with me. You should be thankful. I'm the one keeping the family together." Instead, you could say, "I know you are angry. Would you like to talk about it?"*

You can spare children unnecessary disappointment by not telling them about planned events too far in advance.

Provide your children with skills for handling strong feelings:

- Explain that feelings are neither right nor wrong. It's okay to talk.
- Emphasize that talking about feelings can be helpful and that you will always try to make time when your children need to talk.
- Explain that feelings do not have to control what we do. Give examples.

Example: *"It's okay that you are angry at your father and me. But the way you are acting towards us now is not okay."*

Example: *"Being embarrassed about your father's illness does not stop you from explaining it to your friends."*

- Humour can help to make the whole communication seem positive. Do not use it to discount or ignore your children's feelings.

Helping children learn effective verbal and behavioural responses.

Some practical suggestions for helping children respond to their ill parent include:

- Share with your children any of the discoveries or skills you have learned about what works and doesn't work in dealing with your ill spouse.
Example: "I know it is upsetting when Mommy talks about the food being poisoned, but arguing with her doesn't help."
- Make sure your children understand that even though their parent is ill, it is okay for them to protect themselves from any behaviour that seems scary or dangerous.
- Give specific suggestions for how to protect themselves. Make a rule that your children tell you whenever a situation involving your ill spouse has scared them or made them uncomfortable. Teach your children to tell the ill parent whenever he is scaring or upsetting them.
- Let your children know that showing their ill parent they still love him is very important.

Practical advice for helping children respond to others regarding their ill parent include:

- Involving children in keeping the illness a secret can be extremely burdensome to them.
- What YOU say and do with others about the illness will probably influence your children more than anything you tell them to do.
- Explain to your children that many people don't understand the illness:
 - * It may scare them.
 - * They may try to make fun of it.
 - * They may have ideas that aren't true.
 - * They may change the subject or say nothing.
- Teach your children how to explain the illness to others. The more your children understand, the easier it will be for them to explain it to others.

Practice with them how to respond to other people: "If you understood what is wrong with my father/mother, I don't think you would say what you are saying."

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