



**MIDCENTRAL DISTRICT HEALTH BOARD**  
*Te Pae Hauora o Rūhine o Taranaki*



**SUPPORTING  
FAMILIES**  
in Mental Illness  
Manawatu



# Family/Whānau Talk



Tips and information  
for families/whānau  
where a parent is  
affected by mental  
health &/or addiction



# Who is the book for?

Everyone in families/whānau affected by a parent's mental health &/or addiction. This booklet provides tips, helps answer some of the questions children and young people have, and gives ideas about where families/whānau may seek help. All families/whānau can use a helping hand at times – asking for help or support is sensible and a sign of strength, not failure.

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# Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank the working group that provided their knowledge and expertise for this project. The group has adapted this document to be inclusive of addiction and to be more representative of the unique New Zealand context.



# Information for parents and partners



**While being a parent can be delightfully rewarding, it can also be very challenging at times – and more so if you or your partner is struggling with ill-health.**



Raising children is always costly and some of the suggestions in this booklet have a cost attached to them. If this presents difficulties for you, speak to a social worker or community worker about access to assistance.

As a parent with mental health &/or addiction, one of the most important things to remember is to care for yourself – your children need you to be as well as possible. Talk with your doctor and other health workers about if and how your illness or medication impacts on your important job of parenting. If you're a parent who is the partner of someone with a mental illness, you also need to take care of yourself.

- Consider setting aside some time every week for something you enjoy such as playing a sport, listening to music or participating in a craft activity.
- Getting enough sleep and physical activity, and eating healthy foods are important for all the family; not just the children.
- Identify your strengths as a parent, as a partnership and as a family. There will be things that you are good at doing or that are best done by you with your children. However, there may be other things that could be done by someone else.
- If you don't have a partner, it may help to talk things through with a family member, a trusted friend or a service provider who knows you well.

# Tips from people with mental illness who have raised children



**‘My kids were much happier once we had a plan in place in case I became unwell or had to go to hospital again.’**

Planning for your children’s needs is vitally important and ensures you have a say in what happens to them if you become ill.

Include the children in the planning when they are old enough so they can be reassured that everything will be OK and that you love them. They might have concerns you had not thought to plan for – like who will give them their pocket money or feed the cat if you become ill. Examples of Care Plans for babies, young people and the whole family can be found at [supportingfamiliesnz.org](http://supportingfamiliesnz.org)

**‘I used to get very tired during the school holidays so it was great to be able to take a break from my sons and they really enjoyed themselves at camp.’**

Sometimes children may need a break from their parents, and parents may need a break from their children – especially if the parent has low energy levels due to illness or medication. Older children may also like a break from extra responsibilities they may have in your family.

- Preschoolers often enjoy a regular time at a childcare centre. Call Work and Income on **0800 559 009** for information about services near you.
- Primary school children might enjoy a more formal activity such as a sport or hobby club.
- Adolescents may prefer to just be with friends, having a pizza or going to a movie.



**'Talking to the kids about my own feelings helped them open up about some of their worries – which I could then set their minds at rest about.'**

It's natural for people in families affected by mental health &/or addiction to have strong feelings such as bewilderment, anger, grief or loss from time to time. However, children often hide their feelings, especially if they sense there is some 'secret' associated with the illness.



It is important for all family/whānau members to have a chance to have their questions answered. You may like to ask your key health professional (e.g. your case worker or GP) for a time with your family to answer their questions.

**'When I stopped hitting the grog, the kids were happier and so was I.'**

People sometimes feel that using alcohol and other drugs (including misuse of prescription drugs) will help them feel better. It may do in the short term but can affect your physical and mental health and it really hinders anyone's ability to parent well.

**'It was great when my sister offered to help with the weekend chores so that I could get to my daughter's netball games.'**

We all need friends or family/whānau to help us through; be honest with them about what helps you most. If you don't have friends or family who can help, other household support may be available in your area.

You have a right to ask for help if you don't feel that you or your children are safe. Speak to a health worker you trust or contact **Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757 or txt 1737**

# Information for children & young people



**I didn't cause it.  
I can't control it.  
I can't cure it.  
But I can take care of myself  
by talking about my feelings,  
making good choices and  
celebrating myself**

If you have felt scared or unsafe in the past, make a plan for what you could do if you felt like that again. Some kids like to talk through and write their plan with their parents or an adult they can trust.

**'Did you know that 1 in every 5 people are affected by mental health &/or addiction at some time in their life? I thought it was just in our family/whānau.'**

## **You are not alone**

Lots of children and young people live in families where a parent has a mental health &/or addiction. Sometimes it's great to meet other kids who've gone through some of the same things as you. Ring Kids Helpline on **Freecall 0800 553 754** or visit the websites listed on the back cover to find out more.

# Tips for you from other children & young people

## **‘Find out about your Mum or Dad’s illness.’**

Ask your parents about it or ask them if it’s OK for you to talk to a doctor or other health worker about mental health &/or addiction. Check out the Mental Health Foundation website at [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz) for easy-to-read information about different mental health problems.

**‘Ask as many questions as you like – if you’re like me you’ll find that the ‘real’ story about the illness isn’t half as bad as some of the things you were worrying about.’**

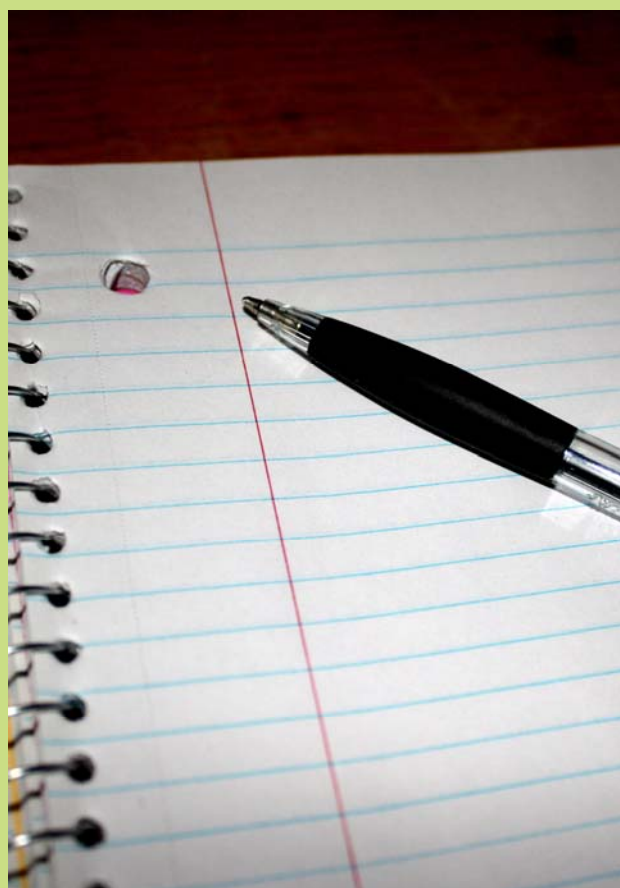
**‘It was great when I found someone I could talk to about things.’**

It often helps to talk to someone you trust about how you’re feeling – maybe a family member, your best friend at school, a school counsellor or doctor. Or you could ring and talk to someone at Kidsline on [Freecall 0800 543 754](tel:0800543754) or [txt 1737](tel:1737)

## **‘Make sure you have some fun.’**

It’s great when family/whānau members can help each other out. If you’re having to take on more than your fair share though, try to make sure you get regular breaks.

**‘Write out a list of the names and phone numbers of the people who you can ring if you need to.’**



# Tips for the extended family/whānau and others that care



**‘Things changed for the better when I stopped and asked them how I could help rather than just going in and doing things for them.’**

Parents with a mental illness may need extra support from families/whānau and friends.

- Ask the family/whānau how best you can support them.
- Talk with the parent about their illness and ask if it's OK to find out more. Discuss any symptoms and warning signs and how you can support them.
- Be understanding and let the parents and children know that they don't have to manage on their own.

You have a right to ask for information that will help you support the family/whānau as best you can, but you must also respect the privacy of the person with the mental health issue.

**‘It seemed like sometimes my teacher was the only one who asked how I was – everyone else was just so worried about Dad.’**

- Remember to ask the children how they feel about what is happening or has happened.
- ‘Be there’ for the children and young people to talk to if need be and also think of practical ways in which you can help make the children's life as much like their school friends' as possible.
- Let family/whānau members express their true feelings – try to be patient and non-judgemental.

**‘Look after yourself – caring can be exhausting.’**



# Discussing things as a family/whānau

We all have different ways that we prefer to communicate. Some children and parents love to talk face-to-face, others prefer to talk when they're doing something with each other (such as building with blocks or preparing a snack together). Think about how and when it might be best to talk about things – and remember, talking isn't the only way to communicate. Ask your doctor or health worker about books written specifically for children about mental health &/or addiction issue. Printable information sheets about how to talk to children of different ages can be found at [supportingparents.nz.org](http://supportingparents.nz.org)

A number of resources can be found for different age groups



**Preschoolers** may require a lot of reassurance and they need explanations in simple words. Try talking in a story form or by drawing pictures or using picture books



**Primary school children** need information at their own level. They may be more able to talk about their own feelings and their parent's feelings at this stage but also need 'straight forward' answers at a practical level about the illness and what will happen if the parent becomes ill. Try to keep your answers simple. Teenagers often talk when they are ready to, rather than at a time of someone else's choosing. Leave the way open for communication, provide literature and discuss things as honestly as you can. It's not always easy to know when a young person is experiencing difficulties, so let them know that you love them and that they can talk to you at any time. It's also healthy for young people to talk things over with other key people in their lives.



# Answering questions from children & young people



Children may have unfounded fears and worries relating to the condition, so encourage them to ask questions. It may be useful to think ahead about how you might respond to questions from your children &/or their friends. Your doctor or other health worker can help if you'd like to talk it over with someone before talking with your child. It may also be useful to think about what, if anything, you might tell your child's teacher or someone like the parents of your child's best friend – though it's certainly your right to retain your privacy. If the children aren't living with the parent with the mental health &/or addiction, it is still important for their questions to be answered.

The other parent or caregiver needs to be well-informed and non-judgemental in sharing information with children about mental health &/or addiction.

## **Common questions children ask**

### **'Did I do something wrong?'**

Children often blame themselves when things go wrong. Make sure they realise that mental ill-health is no-one's fault and can be treated like any other condition.

### **'Can I help make it better?'**

Some children think that their parent will recover their health if they try harder at school or try to behave perfectly. However, when this doesn't seem to work, they may become frustrated, angry or bewildered. It is important to let them know that they are not responsible for their parent feeling unwell.

### **'Why aren't you like other mums/dads?'**

Children and young people are as vulnerable to the stigma and negative attitudes surrounding mental health &/or addiction as the person with the mental health problem. Illness or medication may cause you to act differently from other parents or may restrict the activities you can be involved in. Lots of young people may appear to be embarrassed by their parents or sometimes don't want to be seen with them; this is quite natural. Talk with your children about the impact of your illness or medications and be sensitive to their feelings.

Remember to regularly ask the children how they are feeling about what is happening.

### **'Will I catch it?'**

Children and adolescents who may be concerned about their own future often ask this question. While it's difficult to answer simply, it is important that it be addressed. Let children know that mental illnesses are not contagious and cannot be caught like measles or chicken pox. It may be helpful to learn about the mental health &/or addiction issue and whether or not it has a hereditary component, but let them know that 'risk' does not mean 'destiny'.

### **'When will you be better?'**

It's important to answer children honestly about mental health &/or addiction and its treatment, especially when it is likely that although with help their parent may feel better, there may also be times in the future when they feel unwell and need help again.

Children's understanding of the world changes as they develop, so you may need to answer these questions more than once. Children can manage more complex information as they get older.



A range of information about different mental health &/or addiction is available – your GP, other health worker or public library can provide information, and you can call the numbers or visit the websites listed on the back cover. You may also wish to make a joint appointment with your doctor/case worker and your child to discuss the issues. 'When will you be better?' It's important to answer children honestly about mental health &/or addiction and treatment, especially when it is likely that although with help their parent may feel better, there may also be times in the future when they feel unwell and need help again.

# For more information and help

## National helplines

Need to talk? Free call or text **1737** any time for support from a trained counsellor

**Lifeline** – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland

**Suicide Crisis Helpline** – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

**Healthline** – 0800 611 116

**Samaritans** – 0800 726 666

## Depression-specific helplines

**Depression Helpline** – 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions)

**www.depression.org.nz** – includes The Journal online help service

**SPARX.org.nz** – online e-therapy tool provided by the University of Auckland that helps young people learn skills to deal with feeling down, depressed or stressed

## Sexuality or gender identity helpline

**OUTLine NZ** – 0800 688 5463 (OUTLINE) provides confidential telephone support

## Helplines for children and young people

**Youthline** – 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) or [online chat](#)

**thelowdown.co.nz** – or email [team@thelowdown.co.nz](mailto:team@thelowdown.co.nz) or free text 5626

**What's Up** – 0800 942 8787 (for 5–18 year olds). Phone counselling is available Monday to Friday, midday–11pm and weekends, 3pm–11pm. Online chat is available 7pm–10pm daily.

**Kidslines** – 0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidslines) for young people up to 18 years of age. Open 24/7.

## Help for parents, family and friends

**Commonground** – a website hub providing parents, family, whānau and friends with access to information, tools and support to help a young person who is struggling.

**Parent Help** – 0800 568 856 for parents/whānau seeking support, advice and practical strategies on all parenting concerns. Anonymous, non-judgemental and confidential.

**Family Services 211 Helpline** – 0800 211 211 for help finding (and direct transfer to) community based health and social support services in your area.

**Skylight** – 0800 299 100 for support through trauma, loss and grief; 9am–5pm weekdays.

**Supporting Families In Mental Illness** – For families and whānau supporting a loved one who has a mental illness – 06 355 8561.

## Other specialist helplines

**Alcohol and Drug Helpline** – 0800 787 797 or [online chat](#)

**Are You OK** – 0800 456 450 family violence helpline

**Gambling Helpline** – 0800 654 655

**Anxiety phone line** – 0800 269 4389 (0800 ANXIETY)

**Seniorline** – 0800 725 463 A free information service for older people

**0508MUSICHELP** – The Wellbeing Service is a 24/7 online, on the phone and in-person counselling service fully funded by the NZ Music Foundation and provided free of charge to those in the Kiwi music community who can't access the help they need due to hardship and other circumstances. Call 0508 MUSICHELP.

**Shine** – 0508 744 633 confidential domestic abuse helpline

**Quit Line** – 0800 778 778 smoking cessation help

**Vagus Line** – 0800 56 76 666 (Mon, Wed, Fri 12 noon – 2pm). Promote family harmony among Chinese, enhance parenting skills, decrease conflict among family members (couple, parent-child, in-laws) and stop family violence

**Women's Refuge Crisisline** – 0800 733 843 (0800 REFUGE) (for women living with violence, or in fear, in their relationship or family)

**Shakti Crisis Line** – 0800 742 584 (for migrant or refugee women living with family violence)

**Rape Crisis** – 0800 883 300 (for support after rape or sexual assault)