



## Talking with teenagers about parental mental health issues

### When a parent has a mental health issue young people can pick up on a parent's mood and behaviour.

This resource helps you to prepare for conversations about your mental health issue with your teenager so that they have a better understanding of what is happening. It steps you through:

- Understanding your thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- Understanding what your teenager notices and experiences
- Preparing to talk to your teenager.

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your child might view what is happening. It might be useful to talk with your health professional or another support person about the impact of your mental health issue on your role as a parent.

### Understanding your thoughts, feelings and behaviours

When you understand your mental health issue, you will be more familiar with how it influences your thoughts, behaviour and feelings. This will help you to develop an understanding of the impact of your mental health issue on you and your teenager.

Thoughts, behaviour and feelings influence how you view yourself and how others view you. They also influence your relationships with others, including your child. An important first step in preparing to talk with your teenager about your mental health issue is to reflect on your experiences, the behaviours your child sees and hears and how these influence how your child feels.

Note: Conversations with your teenager about mental health issues are meant to help them to make sense of *their* experience. If you are trying to make sense of *your* mental health issue, or need to talk about your experiences, find an adult that you trust, a health professional or a peer worker. Do not go to your teenager to help you to understand your mental health issues.

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*I think it's best coming from us. I'd got to a point where I had accepted my diagnosis, I was getting some treatment, and I knew enough about it to explain it to them in an age-appropriate way."*

Ben, parent

## A reflective exercise

Do this exercise on a day you are feeling well.

Think about the thoughts, feelings and behaviours you experience. Circle those on the following list of common experiences to get started.

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking and moving slowly | <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling to concentrate         | <input type="checkbox"/> Very tired                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying a lot            | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or hearing things          | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping a lot            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicious thoughts       | <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritable, short-tempered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic flashbacks      | <input type="checkbox"/> Not mixing with others            | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry outbursts           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad or teary              | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over-sensitive            | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harm                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling numb                      |  |

Are there any others? List these below.

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.....

.....

Write the five things from the list above that worry you the most at the top of the circles below. Focus on those that impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your teenager might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.

		
		



### Understanding what your teenager notices and experiences

Children of different ages will notice and react to your behaviour and emotions differently.

Parent-teenager relationships can be complex. Teenagers are in the process of 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.

Teenagers can understand factual and complex information and are usually better able to express their feelings and thoughts than younger children. It is common for teenagers to worry about their parent, their mental health issue and how this impacts on their relationship with you. They may want to know how you were diagnosed and whether you will get better. Some teenagers also worry about whether they will develop a mental health issue. They may want to know how to explain your mental health issue to others without feeling like they are being disrespectful or disloyal to you.

Thinking about the things you listed above:

- How might your thoughts, feelings and behaviour be influencing your teenager?
- How might your thoughts, feelings and behaviours impact on your relationship with your teenager?
- Which behaviours appear to be the most challenging for them?
- How might this impact on your teenager's involvement with community activities, friends or peers?
- What concerns might your teenager have about their own mental health?
- How might your thoughts, feelings and behaviours be influencing their decisions?
- What information could help your teenager to understand what they have observed about your behaviours?

### Preparing to talk with your teenager

Conversations with your teenager about your mental health issue are important. These conversations help your teenager understand the family or whānau situation and make sense of what they are experiencing. When your teenager does not understand what is happening in the family or whānau they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand the situation. They may feel personally responsible, be worried about you and be worried about your health and safety.

Helping your teenager to understand mental health issues and what it means for your family or whānau will:

- Help your teenager to know that it is okay to talk about mental health issues
- Allow your teenager to ask questions and get the correct information
- Help them to come to you (or others) when they are worried or overwhelmed
- build an understanding that can strengthen your relationship.

Other trusted adults can be helpful when explaining your mental health issue to your teenager. Consider grandparents, other family or whānau members or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Tell them about the information you have given to your teenager and the information that you would like them to share with your teenager. You can also tell them if there is any information that you do not want to be shared with your teenager.



### Getting started

You might start a conversation about mental health issues with:

- “You may have been worried about..... or noticed.....”  
(Use the list above to get started.)
- “I want you to know I have a mental health issue. But you have not caused this and it’s not your fault”.

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

- ‘What have you noticed that worries you?’

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 of how you might start:

- “You might have noticed I don’t 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.”

Write your own starting script here:

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### Tips to remember

- Talk to your teenager at their level using words they understand.
- Stop and pause after each new bit of information.
- Give your teenager time to think and ask questions (the questions might not come straight away, they may need thinking time).
- If you do not know the answer tell them that you will find out, or even find out together.
- Encourage your teenager to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. But be sure to set up a process for them so if you do not have the energy to answer questions they still feel valued and know that you will make time for it later.

- One discussion is never enough – a shared understanding takes time and your teenager’s questions and need for information will change as they get older.
- Set up a support network for your teenager so that if you can not answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust (e.g. a family member, a family friend or a health professional).

Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Often the first discussion is the most daunting. Small conversations can build on your teenager’s and your family or whānau’s shared understanding over time.

### Resources

- A range of free resources that can help you to talk with your child about your mental health issue are available at the Emerging Minds website: [www.emergingminds.com.au](http://www.emergingminds.com.au)
- ‘About Mental health issue’ - a series of short video clips for young people by young people who have a parent with a mental health issue: [www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness](http://www.copmi.net.au/mental-illness)
- ‘When your parent has a mental health issue’ - a booklet for teenagers to help them better understand a parent’s mental health issue. This can be ordered or viewed online at the COPMI website [www.copmi.net.au/materials](http://www.copmi.net.au/materials)