



## Talking with primary school age children about mental health issues

### When a parent is experiencing a mental health issue children 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 child so that they have a better understanding of what is happening. It steps you through:

- Understanding your feelings and behaviours
- Understanding what your child notices and experiences
- Preparing to talk with your child.

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 feelings and behaviours

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

Emotions, behaviour and moods 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 child about mental health issues is to reflect on the feelings and behaviours you experience, the behaviours your child sees and hears and how these influence how your child feels.

Note: Conversations with your child 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 issues, 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 child to help you to understand your concerns.

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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 when you are feeling well.**

Think about the way your mental health issues impact on you. Circle the things on the following list of common experiences that you experience.

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <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 child might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.

		
		

## Understanding what your child notices and experiences

Children at different ages will notice and react to your behaviours and emotions differently. Primary school age children are very perceptive and pick up on even the smallest changes in their parent's behaviours or body language (despite a parent's attempts to 'hide' them).

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

Thinking about your feelings and behaviours that you listed above:

- How might your child have made sense of these?
- What have you noticed about their reaction to your feelings and behaviour?
- What do you think they might be feeling?
- What might they understand in the language you use?
- What behaviours do you think might worry your child the most?

## Preparing to talk with your child

Conversations with your child about your mental health issue are important. These conversations help your child understand the family or whānau situation and make sense of what they are experiencing. When your child 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 child to understand mental health issues and what it means for your family or whānau will:

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



### Starting the conversation

You might start a conversation about your mental health issue with:

- *"You may have been worried about..... or noticed....."*

(Use the feelings and behaviours list above to get started.)

- *"I want you to know I have a mental health issue. You have not caused this and 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 about me?" or "I am here to talk to you if you have any questions or are worried."*

You can then follow with:

- *"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 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."*

Write your own starting script here:

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### Tips to remember

- Talk to your child at their level using words they will understand.
  - Stop and pause after each new bit of information.
  - Give your child time to think and to ask questions (the questions might not come straight away, your child may need thinking time).
  - If you do not know the answer to a question tell them that you will find out, or even 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.
  - Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. But be sure to set up a process for them so that if you are too unwell or do not have the energy to answer questions they still feel valued and know that you will make time for it later.
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you can't answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust (e.g. a family or whānau member, a 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 child's and your family or whānau's shared understanding over time.

Other trusted adults can be helpful when explaining your mental health issue 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.

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*I didn't know...that some kids really do think they are responsible for their mum or dad's mental illness. I've since gone back and reassured them that none of this is their fault and they are not responsible for my moods or behaviours... I'm responsible for all of those things."*

Julie, parent

### Resources

A range of free resources that you can use to help your child understand mental health issues are available at the Supporting Parents Healthy Children website: [www.supportingparents.nz.org](http://www.supportingparents.nz.org)

There are many ways to get help and information on looking after your mental health and how to share this information with your family or whānau. If extra support is needed, ask your doctor or mental health professional for guidance.