

## Child and Youth Mental Health Information Series *General Information for Carers*

### What is the Issue?

#### *For children and young people*

Mental health problems can affect all families. About one in four children and young people will experience a mental health disorder in a twelve month period.

For young people, mental health problems are already as common as physical health problems, such as asthma. Mental health problems that affect children and young people include depression and anxiety disorders, grief, suicide, self-harm and challenging and disruptive behaviours such as conduct disorders, post-traumatic stress, psychosis and eating disorders.

Many factors can contribute to mental health problems. Some of these are related to external stresses such as school, employment, financial hardship, or feeling alone and not part of the community. Others are associated with family or relationship difficulties, transitions including starting school or a new baby in the family, or peer difficulties.

Trauma such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse may increase the risk of many mental health problems and disorders. Genetic factors may also contribute to vulnerability for many mental health problems.

Particular groups of young people may be more vulnerable to experiencing mental health problems. These include children and young people who are:

- Parents;
- Using drugs or alcohol;
- Homeless or transient;
- Living in rural and remote areas;
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander;
- Physically or intellectually disabled;
- Involved with the criminal justice system;
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender;
- From a culturally and linguistically diverse background; and
- From a family where a parent has their own mental health and/or drug and alcohol problem/s.

A warm affectionate relationship with at least one parent and positive experiences during development can help to protect children and young people from developing or worsening mental health problems.

#### *For siblings*

A child or young person's mental health problems may also have an impact on their brothers or sisters. As they grow older children become more aware of what is considered "normal" behaviour, and so may be sensitive to differences within their own family.

A carer's time and attention can be taken up looking after the family member who is struggling the most. This may include practical arrangements such as coordinating appointments and managing difficult behaviour, which in turn may drain a carer's emotional and physical energy in attending to the needs of all family members. This is especially true following a crisis, such as an argument or the threat of physical violence.

Siblings may feel left out if they are not asked how they are feeling, and confused if they aren't told what is going on. In the absence of accurate information, they may feel responsible for their brother or sister's mental health problem and so may take on some of the care giving role to help out their parent or carer. They may also experience a range of conflicting emotions towards their sibling, including anger, resentment, embarrassment, jealousy and sadness. They may also worry about developing their own mental health problems as they get older. Young children in particular do not have the ability to describe how they are feeling, and so may demonstrate it through their behaviour. This may include attention seeking for comfort and reassurance, aggression, rapid changes in mood and sometimes regression to an earlier stage of development.

#### *For carers*

Watching a child or young person grappling with a mental health problem can be heartbreaking for parents and carers. It is often hard to know what it is they are experiencing, or how to help. It can also take a toll on your own relationships, work life and health and well-being.

Parents and carers may experience a wide range of emotions about their child's difficulties, including anger, guilt, despair, anxiety, shame and a loss of hope. These are not unexpected given the impact that a mental illness can have on a child or young person and their family.

It is important to realise that **you are not alone** in your experiences. Finding out more information about your child's difficulties, what you can do about them and how to best look after yourself and your family will help you and them cope better with the difficulties.

This fact-sheet provides some general information for parents and carers, but you may also want to refer to the support services over the page or the full list of mental health fact-sheets in this series included on page 4.

### **What are the signs to look for?**

At times it may be difficult to work out whether changes are due to a child's natural development, or something more concerning.

The following may be signs of a mental health problem in children and young people. If they last for more than a few weeks, they could be much clearer signs of mental illness so it may be time to seek professional help:

- Irritability;
- Fearfulness;
- Social withdrawal;
- Marked fall in school work;
- Marked weight gain or loss;
- Feeling hopeless or worthless;
- Excessive disobedience or aggression;
- Inability to get along with other children;
- Hearing voices that no one else can hear;
- Lack of energy, motivation or concentration;
- Decline in normal responsibilities or hygiene;
- Changes in usual sleeping or eating patterns;
- Crying a lot, sometimes for no apparent reason;
- Restlessness, fidgeting and trouble concentrating;
- Reluctance to go to school or take part in normal activities;
- Mood swings, including anger, sadness, fear and "sudden highs"; and/or
- Odd ideas or behaviours, including a preoccupation with particular themes.

**If children or young people have persistent thoughts about hurting themselves (or somebody else) or wanting to die, they need urgent professional help.**

### **Early Recognition**

Families and friends are often the first to notice changes but they may be reluctant to talk about these. Families may also be embarrassed about seeking help or may decide to wait, hoping that problems will sort themselves out. For most mental health problems, early help gives the best results.

Even if you are unsure about problems, it is best to seek professional advice from one of the services listed overleaf. The chances are that there is not a serious problem, and time and support for your child are all that are needed. However, if there is a developing mental illness, then getting help early is very important as there is a good chance of managing their symptoms such as through counselling and careful use of medication if needed.

There is also a better chance your child will maintain a good relationship with you and their friends and have more time for normal experiences and activities which help keep them emotionally well.

Along with general practitioners and general health staff, you can also talk to pre-school and school staff, such as class teachers, year co-ordinators or guidance officers. Getting the full picture of what's going on outside the home can help you develop a broader understanding of what your child or young person is experiencing.

Effective help for children and young people with mental health problems and their families generally involves information and awareness, short-term counselling or therapies. These are usually based in the local community with as little disruption to school and family life as possible.

### **How families and friends can help**

As a first step, there are a number of ways to show your children you care about them and to protect their mental health, such as:

- Being aware of their needs and capacities at different stages of development;
- Showing affection, interest and regard for their well-being;
- Comforting them when they are distressed or anxious;
- Keeping up contact with and interest in your child's activities, even if they avoid family involvement. This may include spending time with your children and helping them with sports and hobbies, or playing with and reading to younger children;
- Encouraging them to talk about their feelings and to work out problems even when it is difficult. It's best to do this when you're both calm and you feel your child will respond well;
- Communicating that while you may sometimes not like your child's behaviour, you still love them as well as like them as a person;
- Reassuring them that you forgive them for any difficult behaviour, and that you won't hold a grudge;
- Providing firm and consistent care, including setting firm but fair limits that match their age and stage of life;
- Supporting them to access support and information. Not all children and young people will want to take this option, so you can still find about this on their behalf to pass on strategies indirectly.
- It can sometimes be useful to talk to young people about their experiences as a sign of stress. A youth-friendly brochure on coping with stress can be ordered free of charge from the Alcohol and Drug Information Service on 1800 177 833.
- Seeking counselling if you and your partner are having relationship difficulties, as constant fighting between parents can make things worse. Sorting out relationship problems may help your children.

### **Looking after siblings**

By understanding and coping with the difficulties of family life, many siblings develop compassion and become appreciative of their own opportunities, which will in turn become the building blocks for their future emotional and psychological well-being. Listed below are some strategies that can help a sibling adjust to mental health problems of another child in the family:

- Provide siblings with an opportunity to explore and express their feelings, both positive and negative;
- Reassure siblings that their needs, experiences, feelings and concerns are valid;
- Give honest and simple explanations regarding the mental health problem. It is important to use language that is age appropriate. It is likely that these explanations will need to be repeated over time;

- Reassure young siblings that they did not cause their sibling's disability or illness, nor will they catch it;
- Explain the reasons for differential treatment and for the different rules and expectations that may be applied to the child with a mental health problem;
- Encourage children and young people to participate in interests outside of the family. Praise them for their efforts;
- Acknowledge siblings for their efforts in being a 'good' brother or sister. This is an important way of supporting the development of their identity and self-esteem;
- Give siblings simple strategies to help them cope with difficult situations, eg. teasing in the playground; and
- Discuss your future plans for the care of the child with the mental health problem to help to allay any concerns siblings may have regarding their role in their sibling's future care needs.

### **Looking after you**

Focusing on your child and trying to help them resolve their mental health problem – while looking after the rest of the family and trying to manage your own affairs - can be very draining for parents and carers. It may reach the point where you neglect to look after yourself, and in fact feel that doing so is selfish.

However, it is important to keep up your own self-care. Doing so sets a good example for your child about the importance of nurturing themselves and gives you back the emotional energy to keep going. If a parent or carer is coping well, it often means that other family members will find things less stressful as well.

Listed below are some suggestions for looking after yourself, which you may also want to encourage other family members to try:

- Monitor your internal stress levels, and try some slow, deep breathing for a few minutes to help you focus when you need it;
- Try to keep balance in your life, including maintaining a healthy diet, getting enough good quality rest and sleep and enjoying moderate exercise on a regular basis.
- Enjoy some uninterrupted "me" time, such as reading a good book, going for a walk or visiting a café.
- Try to keep up your sense of humour. If you're finding it hard to laugh, watch a favourite comedy or swap jokes with a friend.
- Revisit or take up a new hobby. Local councils and community centres often provide a wide range of free or low-cost activities.
- Keep in touch with friends who have been a good source of support, and who you think will be able to provide a listening ear for what you're going through.
- Express how you're feeling. As well as talking with friends, this may include having a cry, using a journal, accessing a support group or seeking out your own professional help.
- Consult your GP about your own mental health. Don't forget, at any time one person in five reports symptoms of a mental disorder.

### **Treatment of Mental Health Problems**

There are two main types of treatment for mental health problems. When these problems are more severe, it is often useful to combine them for a child or young person to obtain the most benefit.

*(a) Medication:* This needs to be prescribed by a doctor, in particular your general practitioner or a psychiatrist. They will try to match the type of medication to a child's needs, and will generally start on a lower dose to reduce the chance of unpleasant side-effects. It is important to remember that it can take a few days to a few weeks for medication to take effect, and so a child's response to any prescription needs to be closely monitored.

*(b) Talking therapies:* These include cognitive-behaviour therapy and family therapy, and are designed to equip a child or young person (and family members) with an increased understanding of their difficulties as well as skills to cope with them. Therapies may also include skilful use of play and creative expression. In each case, therapies should be delivered by a clinician with specialised training in their use with children and young people.

### **How to get help**

Sometimes it can be difficult to encourage your child to see a professional when something is not quite right. Because they may perceive it as a criticism of their behaviour, they may feel that others are against them and so become frightened or angry. Others may have trouble getting their thoughts together well enough to explain their problems, feel too anxious about doing so or may be too unwell. However, it's important to persevere to help them get the support they need.

You can also help by providing specific details about the behaviour you're concerned about; including school reports before and after the problem began. Some of the following agencies may also be able to help:

- Your child's general practitioner, teacher, guidance officer, school counsellor or school health nurse.
- You're local Community Health Centre.
- If more specialised assessment or intervention is required, general practitioners, schools or other health professionals can make a referral to a Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS). Those over the age of 18 years may be seen by an adult mental health service. For local clinics, look under Health in the White Pages telephone directory or call the Health Information Service (see below).

**The Brisbane North Youth Service Provider Directory has details of many relevant services, go to: [www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/professionals/BNYSPD.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/professionals/BNYSPD.pdf) or you could also consider one of the following.**

### **Services**

#### **Alcohol and Drug Information Service**

Free confidential counselling and information service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone: 1800 177 833.

**Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill:** Support and information for significant other/s of those affected by mental illness. Call their head office on (07) 3254 1881 or see [www.arafmiqld.org](http://www.arafmiqld.org) for local support groups.

### **Community Action for the Prevention of Suicide:**

Not-for-profit association that aims to provide a practical non-clinical service to coordinate care, attention and support for people at risk of suicide, those who are concerned for someone at risk, and the children of someone at risk. Phone (07) 3870 8359 or see [www.caps.org.au](http://www.caps.org.au).

### **Health Information Service**

For general health information and referral. Now includes the Child Health Line. Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

### **Indigenous Youth Health Service**

Provides assistance on all health issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Phone: (07) 3393 0055 during business hours.

### **Kids Help Line**

Free national telephone counselling for children and young people 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 1800 55 1800.

### **Lifeline**

Free counselling and support, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 13 11 14.

### **Parentline**

Counselling and support for parents, available 8am – 10pm, seven days a week. Phone 1300 30 1300.

### **Positive Parenting Program**

System of parenting solutions for toddlers through to teenagers Phone (07) 3236 1212 during business hours.

### **Relaxation Centre of Queensland**

Provides courses, workshops and resources on a range of topics relating to relaxation. Phone (07) 3856 3733 or see [www.relaxationcentreql.com.au](http://www.relaxationcentreql.com.au).

### **Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Service**

Provides mental health assistance and information to people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Phone (07) 3167 8333 during business hours.

### **SANE Australia**

National charity aimed at enhancing mental health through campaigning, education and research. Phone: 1800 187 263.

### **Suicide Call Back Service**

Free nation-wide telephone support service for those displaying suicidal behaviour, carers of those at risk and those bereaved by suicide. Phone 1300 659 467

### **Young Carer's Program**

Free counselling and support for young people (up to 25 years) in a care giving role. Phone 1800 242 636 or see [www.carersqld.asn.au](http://www.carersqld.asn.au).

### **Websites**

**[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au):** National, independent, not for profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance disorders.

**[www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au):** Information and resources for children, young people, families and service providers assisting families affected by parental mental illness.

**[www.counsellingonline.org.au](http://www.counsellingonline.org.au):** Counseling via text-interaction for information and support for those seeking help with their own drug use or use by a friend or family member.

**[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au):** Website for the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, which aims to support Australian young people with mental health and related problems.

**[www.health.qld.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/mentalhealth):** Queensland Mental Health Branch website developed for the community, service providers, non-government organisations, consumers, carers and families, providing information on mental health and related issues and initiatives.

**[www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer):** Queensland Health website for information and support for those caring for someone with a mental illness.

**[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au):** Kids Help Line online counselling available for young people.

**[www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au):** Australian government suicide prevention strategy website.

**[www.opendoors.net.au](http://www.opendoors.net.au):** Up-to-date information and resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people, including direct email links to workers.

**[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au):** Practical, expert child health and parenting information and activities

**[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au):** Interactive forum for young people to access support and assistance.

**[www.somazone.com.au](http://www.somazone.com.au):** Information for young people about health and well-being issues.

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This fact sheet was updated in April 2009 by the Child and Youth Mental Health Service of the Royal Children's Hospital, Children's Health Service District, Brisbane, to raise awareness and provide information to families, young people and community members. Listed below are the other fact sheets available in the series:

- Anxiety
- Psychosis
- Depression
- Grief and loss
- Eating disorders
- Suicide prevention
- Behaviour problems
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Coping after suicide (for young people)
- Supporting Children and Young People After Suicide

This and all other fact sheets can be downloaded from: [www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/families/cymhs.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/rch/families/cymhs.asp)

### **Acknowledgments:**

The content of this fact sheet was in part based on the publication by the Schizophrenia Fellowships Council of Australia, entitled *Something is Not Quite Right: Getting Help Early for Mental Illness (1998)*.

### **Disclaimer:**

Information in this fact sheet is intended as a guide only. Although every effort was made at the time of printing to ensure the accuracy of information, Queensland Health does not accept responsibility for change in service details. Queensland Health accepts no responsibility for the way in which this fact sheet is used. In addition, quality of service provision is the responsibility of individual service provided.