

Should you discuss your mental illness with your kids?

Studies show that if parents diagnosed with a mental illness don't discuss it with their children, their kids could be misinformed and worry. Misperceptions and fears can actually be worse than reality; kids may be asking themselves questions such as:

- Did I do something wrong?
- Is this my fault?
- Do Mom and Dad still love me?
- What will happen to me?

While it is understandable that you may want to shelter your children from your struggles with mental illness, they likely already know that something is amiss. It is important that kids get their information first-hand from you versus misinformed friends or relatives, mass media or their own overactive imaginations.

Countering the effects of misinformation is a compelling reason to talk to kids about your mental health, but it's not the only one. Discussing your mental illness, or that of your partner, can help children build resiliency, increase understanding and improve their ability to cope with a parent suffering from a mental illness.

Risk and protective factors

Having a parent with mental illness is one of several risk factors for children to develop a mental illness of their own. Other risk factors include social isolation, childhood trauma, and substance use. However, having a parent with a mental illness does *not* mean that your child will develop one. In fact, many "protective" factors may come into play, including: good physical health, strong relationships, sound problem-solving skills, a sense of belonging and a feeling of control over one's life.

Clearly, it's important to discuss your (or your partner's) mental illness with your children, but are you prepared? Below are a few tips for discussing this situation should it occur within your family.

- **Be honest and prepared to answer questions.** This requires some homework on your part. Speak with mental healthcare providers and gather as much information as possible from authoritative sources. Anticipate questions and be prepared with facts.
- **Reassure your children that their feelings and emotions are normal.** It's completely normal for people to feel shocked, embarrassed, scared, angry or uncertain after learning a loved one has a mental illness. Remind them that it's not their fault, or anyone else's.
- **Be age appropriate.** Younger children will need shorter explanations and fewer details than their older siblings.
- **Explain that the condition is an illness.** For example, you might ask the kids to think back to a time they were sick. "Remember how lousy you felt and how grumpy you were?" As they nod in agreement, you could say, "Did you stop loving the rest of us just because you felt crummy? It's the same way with mom (or dad). She is sick and feels awful but she still loves you dearly. She just isn't able to express her love right now."

Kids are amazingly perceptive, so hiding a mental illness from your kids can backfire. However, proactively educating your children can ease their fears and help them become more resilient, understanding and mentally healthier as a result.

Talking to your kids at any age about your mental health

Your family can likely sense your anger, sadness and other emotions despite your best efforts to mask them. Though uncomfortable at times, talking to your kids about your mental health can reduce anxiety, clear up misconceptions and cut through the confusion. Further, you also have the opportunity to provide accurate information, reduce stigma and reassure your family that mental illness is treatable.

Discussing mental illness with your children

How you talk to your kids about mental health concerns depends on their ages as well as your own knowledge about the topic. You may need to do your own research to ensure that you are well-informed and able to discuss it in a meaningful, age-appropriate manner.

Preschoolers – Just as you wouldn't go into great detail about the male and female reproductive systems when discussing where babies come from with preschoolers, the same is true when discussing mental illness. Younger children aren't ready for detailed information but they are likely to be aware of another person's emotional outbursts, changed appearance or unusual behaviors. Keep your answers brief and matter-of-fact and try not to over-inform.

School-age children – Older children will likely need more information and ask more questions. They may feel uncomfortable in the presence of an emotional person or unsafe with someone suffering from a mental illness. If a parent has a mental illness, reassure the child that it is an illness and no one, particularly the child, is to blame. The time for this discussion is when your child feels comfortable and safe. Answer questions honestly and in a straightforward manner. Depending on your child's age and maturity, a few questions and answers may be all that is needed to put him or her at ease.

Teenagers – Teenagers may already have misconceptions about mental illness due to discussions with their peers and stereotypes perpetuated by mass media. They may have tougher questions than their younger siblings, but can handle more information. Allow the teen to ask questions, share concerns, and contribute to the discussion. Remember that when talking with teenagers, they tend to be more receptive to two-way conversations than lectures.

Whatever the age, accurate information and a straightforward manner can set the stage for your child's understanding of mental illness and compassion for those affected. With one in four adults in America experiencing a mental illness in any given year, this is a critical skill for all children to learn. Encourage questions and work to "normalize" mental illness. Open discussions and information about mental health issues can build resiliency, reduce stigma and minimize feelings of shame.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call 1 866 468-9461 or visit shepellfgi.com.