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## What you need to know about parenting with a mental health issue

Managing a mental health condition can be complicated, and may be even more challenging for those also trying to raise a family. We look at ways to manage your mental health while also supporting your children.

Around 1 in 6 people in the UK are struggling with a mental illness, according to [data](#) compiled by the House of Commons, with [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) the most common conditions. Parents and carers are in no way immune to mental health issues, but dealing with one when you have other responsibilities can be a challenge.

### Talk about it

When we're suffering from a mental health problem such as depression or anxiety, it's easy to neglect ourselves. But in order to parent effectively it's important we keep ourselves in the best health possible. This means recognising when we're struggling, and seeking appropriate help from our GP or a trained [counsellor](#). Taking our [mental health](#) seriously and admitting we are struggling is a sign of strength, rather than an admission of weakness.

It can be hard enough to open up to a medical professional about mental health problems, but it's even more challenging to open up to our own children. Parents may be worried about frightening or upsetting their child, or may prefer to act as if everything is fine.

However, if you are struggling, it's likely your child will have picked up on the signs subconsciously – they may well know something is wrong, but not be sure exactly what. This can knock their confidence and make them feel frightened. Being upfront and talking about the issue can help them to make sense of the world and feel safe.

"When parents mask their feelings, it can be confusing for a child – they lose confidence in what they think and feel," explains [Dr Sharie Coombes](#), a psychotherapist who specialises in looking after children, adolescents and families. "It also makes it harder for you to reach out to a child if they are struggling."

This doesn't necessarily mean going into too much detail – but explaining that things are difficult, why and what you are doing about it should help your children to [feel more confident](#). "Be honest but not sensational" advises Coombes. "Tell them that things are tricky right now, but it won't always be the case. Explain how you are feeling and what you are doing to get better."

## Futureproofing

If you are suffering from anxiety, depression or another mental health condition your child may well also be susceptible to similar conditions. Life events, stress or difficult times can also play a part. Watching a parent who is depressed, or growing up in a house where someone is suffering from mental health problems, can sometimes exacerbate the situation.

It may be helpful to your children if you share your feelings and explain some of the strategies you've used to cope over the years. Telling your children that when you feel [stressed](#) you find [running](#) helpful, or explaining that you write down your worries at the end of each day, can give them valuable insight when it comes to coping with their own difficult times.

Showing that you are confident enough to discuss your issues with your child will also help them to see that it's OK to be open. "It's important that children understand that we're not machines; we can't just keep going no matter what is happening," explains Coombes.

## Offer support

If you can, it's also worth providing support in the form of a third person, someone who can talk to your child about the situation and ask whether anything is worrying them. It may be hard for your child to speak to you – often children don't want to worry their parents – so try nominating another adult for them to talk to if they need to. Having another person to confide in will mean they can ask the questions they may feel unable to voice when speaking to you.

"Children will often not want to bother anyone," explains Coombes. "They don't always know what to do with their feelings and may not be able to pinpoint what is going on. Getting an adult to check in with your child now and again can be really useful."

It can be really useful to introduce your children to a range of different adults – trusted friends, relatives and professionals such as sports coaches or playground leaders. Making sure they are mixing with different types of people can help their own emotional development, particularly during difficult times.

"It's important to allow your child access to a variety of people, so that they are able to get different reactions from different people," explains Coombes. "That way they realise there is a range of different ways to respond to different behaviours and situations."

It's also important to find people with whom your child can have fun. "This doesn't necessarily mean finding someone to take them to a theme park," explains Coombes. "Fun can be drawing a silly picture, doodling glasses on a photo – it's low level, everyday fun that doesn't need to be expensive or time-consuming."

## Give yourself a break

Many parents suffer from parental guilt at the best of times, and coping with feelings of low mood or anxiety while trying our best to raise a family can send that guilt into overdrive. But it's important to remember that depression is an illness like any other. Getting the help you need, and ensuring that your children are supported while you go through difficult times, is important.

However, it's also key to recognise that no parent is perfect. All come with their own issues and nobody is great at parenting all the time. So remind yourself that you are doing your best, and that you don't need to be perfect to be a good parent.

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