



TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR MENTAL ILLNESS

A Supportive Guide for Parents & Caregivers

Why it Matters

Mental illness can be a difficult topic to talk about, especially if you or a close one is experiencing it. Young people often sense when something's wrong, even if they don't understand it. Being open about your mental illness at a level they can understand will;

- help reduce fear, confusion, and shame
- help build honesty and resilience
- help them make sense of what they are experiencing at home
- help ensure that they know that the difficulties in the home are in no way their fault and they are not to blame.
- Help them recognise signs and symptoms of mental health issues in themselves or others which may contribute to help seeking and prevention

Tips on how to talk to young people about mental health

Prepare Yourself

Think about what you want to share and how to say it clearly, calmly, and simply. You don't need to share everything, just what helps them feel safe and informed. Ask yourself if you need support for you before or during the conversation. Find a nice, quiet, calm space to talk.

Top Tip: Write down a few key points to help guide what you say and then when thinking of the space, look at somewhere they don't have to give you eye contact or feel stared at, like playing football, driving in the car, building a jigsaw puzzle.



FACT SHEET



Use Age-Appropriate Language with Empathy and Compassion

Use words that match your child's age and understanding. Also, try and give time, and pause after each bit of information.

Ages 4–7

“Sometimes Mummy or Daddy feels really sad or tired inside. It's not because of you. I'm getting help so I can feel better.”

Ages 8–12

“I have something called depression or anxiety, and it affects how I think and feel. I'm working on it with help from people who support me.”

Ages 13 and up

“Depression is a mental illness and I am getting treatment for this. It can be hard sometimes, but I'm getting help and doing what I need to take care of myself. You can always ask questions.”

Top Tip: Keep language simple and honest, children of all ages appreciate clarity. For younger children, books, stories, and drawings can help explain big feelings and situations.

Invite Questions and build trust

Let your child know they can ask you anything, now or later. It's okay if they don't react right away, keep the door open for future conversations.

Being open and honest will build trust between you, improve relationships and shows them it is okay to talk about difficult topics. You may not always have the answer, but that's okay, say so and you can find who can best help you find it out.

Top Tip: Let them lead the pace and bring it up again naturally over time, yet always be aware of your own emotions and mood first, ensuring you are in a good space to have that conversation.



FACT SHEET



Normalise and Reassure

Make sure your child knows it's not their fault, they didn't cause it, and you still love them and are getting help. By talking to your child about how you are feeling and what you are going through, it will help them make sense of what is happening around them. Providing them this reassurance and understanding will alleviate confusion and fear, and may also encourage them to be more open about how they are feeling too.

Top Tip: Repeat reassurance clearly and with warmth.

Explain What Help Looks Like

Describe what you're doing to feel better, such as seeing a therapist or taking medicine.

"I speak to a professional who helps me with my feelings."

"I take medicine that helps my brain feel better."

"Getting help for our minds is just like going to the doctor for our bodies."

"I have been told to try mindfulness, would you like to try it with me?"

By letting your child know what you are doing to help yourself, you are role modelling to them what they can be doing when dealing with stress or experiencing difficult emotions, as well as the importance of looking after our mental health.

Top Tip: Use comparisons they understand, like going to the doctor when you're sick and try and find healthy activities to do together, that will benefit your well being.

For more tips on how to talk to young people about sensitive topics, please visit our resources page: kookaburrakids.org.au/resources/

ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN KOOKABURRA KIDS FOUNDATION

The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation delivers services to young people (8-18) impacted by family mental illness by improving mental health literacy, encouraging help-seeking behaviours, and fostering a strong sense of connection.

To find out more about our programs please visit our website: kookaburrakids.org.au

To refer a young person to take part in one of our innovative programs designed by qualified mental health clinicians, please visit: <https://kookaburrakids.org.au/get-involved/refer/>

