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## Helping your child with mental illness

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### Summary

- Mental health problems in children can be expressed through disruptive, angry or hyperactive (very active) behaviour or through withdrawal, worry and emotional responses.
  - Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take.
  - Before you consult your healthcare professional, keep a diary that describes your child's behaviour and when and where it occurs.
  - Your doctor can be a good first point of contact for professional help.
  - As well as specific treatments and therapies, you can also create a supportive environment for your child.
  - It is important to look after yourself so you can provide the best possible care for your family.
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When a child or adolescent has a mental health problem they usually have difficulty controlling their emotions, thinking or behaviour. This can affect the whole family.

Mental health problems in children can be expressed through disruptive, angry or hyperactive behaviour (very active behaviour, such that the child is fidgety, has difficulty remaining seated, runs about or climbs excessively in inappropriate situations, has difficulty playing quietly, talks a lot and is constantly on the go) or through withdrawal, worry and emotional responses. These changes can affect your child's ability to communicate, learn and have relationships. Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take. Early support from healthcare professionals can help your whole family.

### Keeping a record of your child's behaviour

The more information you can tell your healthcare professional, the better background they will have of your child's issues. If possible, before you consult your healthcare professional, keep a diary for a week or two that describes your child's behaviour and when and where it occurs. Your diary could include information about:

- the features of the behavioural change that concern you
- any patterns to the behaviour
- how often the behaviour occurs
- how long the behaviour typically continues before it stops
- the time of day it occurs
- what was happening before the behaviour began
- what happened after the behaviour.

Other information that could be helpful includes what you think your child is feeling when they exhibit the behaviour and how they communicate.

### Seeking professional advice and support for mental illness in children

A good first person to visit is your doctor. If you have documented the behaviours that concern you, share this with your doctor who can then make suggestions or refer you to other healthcare professionals.

You could also make an appointment with a child psychologist who can help with advice on:

- how you and your family can cope with behavioural problems
- how your approach to the behaviour can support your child.

For more serious mental illnesses, you might be referred to a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Psychiatrists are specialist medical doctors who can check your child for any medical conditions, prescribe medications and admit

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your child to hospital, if needed.

### **Creating a supportive environment for your child**

How you specifically support your child will depend on you, what your child is experiencing, and advice from your mental health professional. As well as specific treatments and therapies, you can also create a supportive environment for your child by:

- spending time with your children doing enjoyable activities
- maintaining routines as much as possible – such as bed time and meal times
- building supportive relationships
- acknowledging and respecting your child's feelings
- listening to your child's concerns
- speaking with your child's school or childcare centre
- encouraging your child's strengths.

### **Looking after yourself when your child has a mental illness**

Having a child with a mental illness can be exhausting. It is important to look after yourself so you can provide the best possible care for your family.

Some ideas to consider include:

- taking time for yourself – consider getting respite from your partner or a trusted friend
- working on any feelings of guilt – counselling can be very helpful
- trying to manage anxiety and stress – such as through relaxation and meditation
- getting professional support – counselling or parenting skills courses.

Parents of children with mental health difficulties have great need for counselling for their own stress and for help with family relationships. You do not have to face the challenges alone. It might be time to get professional support if you are feeling overwhelmed with fatigue, grief, guilt or fear and anxiety.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Child and adolescent mental health services telephone triage** (follow this link and click on the relevant tab to the right hand side for details of this service in your area) – information, assessment and referral, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Beyondblue** Support Service Tel. 1300 22 4636
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **SuicideLine** Tel. 1300 651 251
- **headspace** Tel. 1800 650 890
- **SANE Australia** Helpline Tel. 1800 187 263
- **MIND Victoria** Tel. 1300 286 463
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **Parentline** Tel. 132 289

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