

**How
are
you?**



Mental health and illnesses in the family

Suggestions for family and friends



Why talking about it is important

Mental health: this subject affects families in all sorts of different ways. Important foundations for healthy mental development are laid in childhood, and the whole family is affected if a member becomes mentally ill.

What do “mentally healthy” and “mentally ill” mean?

2 The dividing line between mental health and mental illness is fluid. All of us are somewhere between the extremes of “healthy” and “ill”. At times we feel better, and at others not so good. If we suffer over an extended period, and we ourselves and those close to us find our feelings or our behaviour increasingly stressful and restricting – then a mental illness may be the cause.

Mental illnesses: common, diverse, treatable.

Mental illnesses can occur in all families. One person in two suffers from a mental illness at least once in his life. Just like physical illnesses, there are many different mental illnesses – each causing different symptoms in individuals and having different effects on them. Most mental illnesses are treatable – and the sooner, the better.

That's worth noting!

When children have mental problems, their parents also come under day-to-day strain. They often suffer self-doubt, sadness, helplessness or rage, asking themselves what they have done wrong. Mothers and fathers who suffer mental illness themselves have feelings of guilt and anxiety that they are not up to meeting the requirements of parenthood. The causes of mental illness are complex. Even today there is much that we do not yet understand. One thing is certain, though: many factors have their part to play when someone becomes mentally ill. The question of guilt is not helpful here.



What does help is talking about it.

Many parents, not wishing to distress their children, avoid talking to them about mental problems. But that does the children concerned no favours. Children notice when something gets out of balance – in themselves or their mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters. Children cannot deal with this on their own. They need adults to talk to them about the illness and help them to find a way of coping with it.

www.how-are-you.ch > Conversation tips

What's the point of diagnoses?

3

Diagnoses are important so that the right treatments can be selected – and paid for by health insurers. Sometimes they are also necessary so that supporting measures can be taken in schools. Diagnosis alone – of depression, psychosis, an attention or learning disorder, for example – is often felt to bring relief: at last there is an explanation for the person's difficulties, or for a child's irregular behaviour. At last it's possible to find out about what's wrong, and to talk to people in similar situations.

Sometimes, however, sufferers feel that they have been overhastily "categorised" and marginalised on the basis of a diagnosis. So diagnoses should always be delivered with the requisite care.

**How
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What strengthens families

Mental illnesses in the family – thinking in the system.

Mental problems occur in the “best” families. Whoever falls ill – child, mother or father – the whole family is always affected. The illness of a family member is a serious challenge for everyone, often more than they can cope with. This is why it is crucial for treatment to take account of the situation of the entire family, and for everyone to be helped: mothers, fathers, other relatives – and last but not least, the children.

Finding ways of coping.

Mental abnormalities can sometimes be entirely cured, but not always. In any case it's important for persons affected and their families to learn to face the challenges that an illness brings. This enables individual family members to get help from specialists, friends, relations, neighbours and other people they trust. The aim is to find out how day-to-day life can be structured to help the whole family – mother, father, children – to recover.

Good social relationships protect us.

4 Stable, reliable and supportive relationships, both within the family and outside it, are an important protective factor for children and adults alike. It is crucial for social contacts and trusting relationships with people outside the family to be established and maintained. In the event of a crisis, well-networked families who are accustomed to talking to third parties about difficulties and challenges are more likely to get help from those around them.

How
are
you?

Dinosaurs.
Training.
Anxiety.

**We talk about
mental health too.**

Talking is the first step.

Talking about mental illness, or simply about problems, anxieties and uncertainties, is the first step in the improvement of a stressful situation. In children and adults alike, mental problems rarely go away of their own accord. Help is needed from grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours, friends, sports coaches, youth workers, colleagues or teachers: they all have major roles to play when someone develops a mental illness and the family system is thrown out of balance as a result.

Tips for those close to persons affected:

Broaching the subject: If you sense that something is wrong, you should broach the subject. Affected children and adults sometimes suffer from inhibitions preventing them from raising the subject themselves and asking for help. Impetus from outside sometimes helps to get things moving in a stressful situation.

Questions, not advice: Solving problem is always a matter for affected families themselves. Even well-intentioned advice is often unhelpful. Every family is organised differently, and what is helpful to one family may be stressful to another. It is sympathetic questions that help mothers, fathers and children. Your starting point for the conversation should be that you want to understand what the other person is experiencing and feeling.

Stay in touch: Many people withdraw when they are not doing well. If someone doesn't want to see you, you should respect that. But be persistent, and stay in touch.

Other conversation tips can be found at www.how-are-you.ch

5

How
are
you?

Break.
Dreams.
Loneliness.

**We talk about
mental health too.**

Mental health in children and young adults

Children have rights.

Children don't need their parents to be perfect in order to develop in good health, but they must be able to rely on their parents and other people close to them. They are entitled to an upbringing that's free of violence, and to be loved, accepted and supported with all their strengths and weaknesses.

Diversity is normal.

Many children suffer from colds all winter, others never do. Children's and young adults' bodies are not all as robust as each other's – and the same is true of their minds. Some children react very sensitively to the smallest changes, while others take even difficult situations in their stride. Different degrees of resilience are normal, and they must be accepted. Children's mental resilience can be boosted, however.

That does children good.

The first few years of a child's life are extraordinarily important for its healthy mental development. This is when the foundations are laid for its self-confidence and its trust in others. People with a good level of self-confidence live more contented, less stressful lives. And they are less often affected by mental illness.

6

How you can promote the healthy development of infants, children and young adults:

- **Security and reliability:** A child needs unconditional love, attention and reliability from at least one person. Care and protection are essential to healthy development.
- **Recognition and interest:** Every child is unique. You should focus on the child's strengths, not its weaknesses. Rather than comparing a child with others, give it time to develop – and take an interest in what it finds exciting. This is how children develop self-confidence.
- **Confidence and trust:** Taking proper account of a child's age, you should entrust some task or other to it. Show how pleased you are that it can already do things for itself, and encourage it if it wants to try something more ambitious. This will increase its confidence in its own abilities.

- **The daily routine:** Rules and rituals give children guidance. They help them to gain a better understanding of the world, enabling them to foresee the reactions of those around them. This is how children develop trust in their fellow human beings and the world.
- **Take feelings seriously:** The ability to perceive and process feelings is an important skill. Feelings serve as a compass: they help us to stand back from things before everything becomes too much for us, to defend ourselves when our own lines are crossed, to engage in things that give us pleasure. You should take your child's feelings seriously even if you don't always understand them. Even negative feelings are OK: adults shouldn't immediately talk them down and try to cheer the child up. Talk to the child about its feelings. Work with it to find ways of coping with negative feelings.
- **Play and discovery:** The healthy child needs play as much as it needs food and drink. You should make sure they have enough spare time for play, even after they start school. Everyday materials and basic items that children can play with in lots of different ways are more valuable than many expensive toys. You should give a child space for its curiosity, in and out of doors. Give it time to experiment and find solutions of its own. This encourages creativity and pleasure in learning. NB: Children's play is paralysed by excessive stimuli and noise, a hectic atmosphere and too many things to play with. Toys with press-button functions do nothing for the child's imagination, or for its personal development. Screen media (TVs, computers, smartphones, games consoles, etc.) should be used only by children over three, and then only under adult supervision.

Further reading and courses (available in German, French and Italian):

- "Stark durch Beziehung" (Strength from relationships), brochure from www.elternbildung.ch > *Materialien*
 - "Elternbriefe" (Letters to parents) from Pro Juventute, children aged 1 to 6, help for parents with day-to-day childraising: www.projuventute.ch > *Programme* > *Elternbriefe*
 - Courses for parents: www.elternbildung.ch > *Elternkurse*
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How about parents' mental health?

At www.how-are-you.ch you can find suggestions for achieving and maintaining mental health in the section "Inputs for mental health".

Mental abnormalities in children

When children suffer for extended periods.

All children are sometimes fearful, unfocused, angry, listless or sad – that's normal. Feelings and conditions like these are part of their lives: they don't necessarily indicate mental illness. Sometimes, though, a child suffers for weeks or even months, and its quality of life is impaired. It's entirely understandable that parents find this worrying, and see the situation as stressful. Nor is it good for the child's brothers and sisters. Talking to a specialist can establish whether it's the child or the whole family that needs support. Suitable specialists include paediatricians, curative teachers, and psychologists or psychiatrists working with schools, children and young adults.

How might the assessment and treatment of children look?

The specialist works with the child and its parents to decide whether an impairment in need of treatment is present. Services range from support in schools for children with learning or behavioural difficulties to speech therapy, psychomotricity and psychotherapeutic methods. Treatment is sometimes brief, while in other cases children need support for extended periods. Who is involved – the whole family, only the individual child or a group of children with similar difficulties – depends on the problem. Parents are entitled to an explanation of why a particular treatment is appropriate and what they can expect it to achieve.

8

Don't lose sight of the positive!

Even if you're worried about your child and the situation is stressful, nobody likes talking about their weaknesses every day. Try to focus on the positive as often as you can. Do something that gives the child pleasure. Notice the many things that your child enjoys and does well. That will give you and your child both strength and courage.

Being a mother or father with a mental illness

What benefits mentally ill parents and their children.

Though all parents come up against their limits in their everyday lives from time to time, the social pressure to be “perfect” parents is still huge. Many people fail to seek help with their mental problems out of the fear of being seen as unfit parents. When parents do seek therapeutic help, though, that help is not limited to the parent with the problem. Therapy also offers the opportunity to talk about the situation of the children and the family. How can parents with mental problems still bring their children up as well as possible? What other support is available for the family? Once that is clarified, the situation of the children may also improve.

Children suffer too.

Children have sensitive antennae. It doesn't often take them long to notice that something isn't right. They can't always explain what's wrong, and sometimes they're not aware that things could be any different. Quite often they are hit hard by the situation, though this may not always be evident. Many children become “difficult”, others try to do everything perfectly to avoid causing additional problems.

9

What concerns the children of mentally ill parents.

Children ask themselves questions like: “Why is Mummy crying? Why is Daddy always too tired to play? Why does Mummy sleep so much? Why does Daddy say such funny things? How should I behave towards Mummy? Is it OK to be happy, or must I be sad too? What can I do if everything at home starts going wrong? Did I make Daddy ill? Will it get even worse? What is therapy? Can my mother or my father get better? Will I or other family members be ill too? Can I tell anyone about it?”



Practical tips for mentally ill parents:

- **Explain what the problem is:** If something is wrong, children sense it. If they don't find out what it is, they blame themselves for the change in mood – and suffer accordingly. Picture books can help to broach the subject.
- **Take your child seriously:** Listen to it, and answer its questions.
- **Maintain the relationship:** You should regularly ask the child how it's feeling, what it's worried about and afraid of, what gives it strength. And tell it where you stand, how you are feeling. That will strengthen the relationship and the trust between you.
- **Stick to familiar routines:** Rituals like reading a story before bed, or regular activities like the Wednesday afternoon judo class, give children security and support.
- **Make it easy to talk:** Your child needs people it can talk to about its situation. Older children especially want to talk to other children in similar situations.
- **Tell those around you:** If people are kept up to speed about the family situation, they can react more appropriately to changes in the child's behaviour and give it more support.
- **Take the strain off yourself and your child:** When you no longer have the strength to look after your children yourself, it's important to have a support network. Not just in order to cope with day-to-day life, but also to organise leisure. Children need space to get back to just being children, with no worries. Who might be able to take them on a trip or to the cinema, help them with their hobbies, drive them to sports training sessions or help with the housework?
- **Don't forget what matters most:** A smile and a hug give your child hope and trust.

Recommended reading and websites for the support of children of mentally ill parents:

- Pro Juventute offers brochures for parents, children and young adults on this subject: shop.projuventute.ch > *Private & Firmen* > *Psychisch kranke Eltern* (available in German, French and Italian)
 - The Institut Kinderseele Schweiz supports parents with mental problems and their children, and provides information for friends, relations, teachers and specialists: www.iks-ies.ch (available in German)
 - There are projects for the support of children and young adults with a mentally ill parent in various regions of Switzerland. An overview of regional Vereinigungen von Angehörigen psychisch Kranker (VASK) (Associations of Family Members of the Mentally Ill) can be found at: www.vask.ch (available in German, French and Italian)
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How
are
you?

**Soothe.
Garden.
Emptiness.**

**We talk about
mental health too.**

Advisory services:

Advice by phone: Confidential help and advice – anonymously if you wish

- Tel. 0848 35 45 55, parents' hotline: for parents and other family members (fixed line charge)
- Tel. 058 261 61 61, Pro Juventute advice for parents and other family members (in German; free of charge)
- Tel. 143, Die Dargebotene Hand / La Main Tendue: advice line for adults (in German, French and Italian; free of charge)
- Tel. 147, Pro Juventute: advice line for children and young adults (in German; free of charge)
- Tel. 0848 800 858, Pro Mente Sana advice line: for questions about mental illness (in German; standard charge)
- Tel. 052 266 20 45, advice from the Institute Kinderseele Schweiz: for questions about psychological stress of a parent (in German)

Advice online and by text

- Pro Juventute online advice for parents: www.elternberatung.projuventute.ch
- E-mail advice from the parents' hotline: www.elternnotruf.ch
- Advice by chat and e-mail from Die Dargebotene Hand / La Main Tendue: www.143.ch
- 12 • Advice by chat, text and e-mail from Pro Juventute for children and young adults: www.147.ch
- E-mail advice from Pro Mente Sana: www.promentesana.ch

Order or download brochures

At www.how-are-you.ch > *More about the campaign* > *Order brochures* you can order or download further copies of this brochure, two brochures on mental health at work, a general brochure on mental health and illnesses and a brochure containing tips on how to conduct talks.

Campaign partners:

Cantons and pro mente sana



On behalf of:

Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz
Promotion Santé Suisse
Promozione Salute Svizzera
