

Parents Raising Children with Mental Illness

Introduction

It is estimated that worldwide up to 20% of children suffer from debilitating mental illness. Mental disorders that pose a significant concern include learning disorders, hyperkinetic disorders (ADHD), depression, psychosis, pervasive development disorders, attachment disorders, anxiety disorders, conduct disorder, substance abuse and eating disorders. Living with such children can be very stressful for caregivers in the family. (National Library of Medicine- [Child Adolescent Psychiatry Ment Health](#). 2012; 6: 16.)

Raising Children with a Mental Health Condition

Raising children with mental health conditions is challenging. Patience can wear thin, because you want your child to do the things you need them to do. Frustration can leak into your communication. Walls can go up. Instead of loving each other, you feel like you're at war. (National Alliance on Mental Health- Raising Children with Mental Illness, 2018; Melinda Cook). Ultimately, without the correct education on their child's mental health diagnosis, this can cause a discord in the relationship, and an environment of strife.



Studies have shown parents that have a child with mental illness tend to suffer a great deal of guilt and/or shame. Some parents tend to take on the belief that their child's mental illness was a result of being passed down by their genetics and/or merely the result of improper upbringing or other stressful circumstances. As a result, parents tend to experience emotional, mental, and physical fatigue with the belief that somehow, they've failed their child. It has been shown that a child's development depends on their parents—and other caregivers who act in the role of parents—who serve as their first sources of support in becoming independent and leading healthy and successful lives. Depending on the family dynamics, being the sole support system with very little outside support can over time become emotionally, mentally, financially, and physically depleting to a parent(s).

Things to Consider and Remember When You're the Caregiver

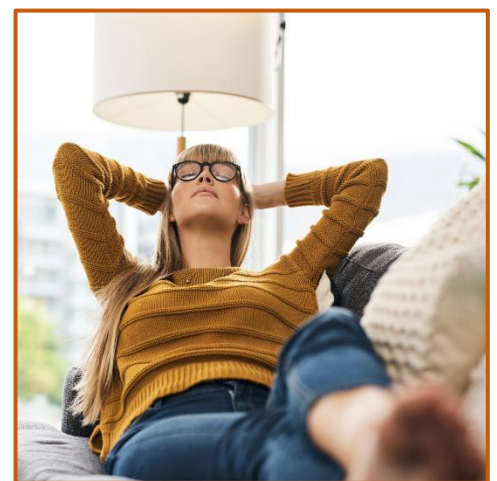
A few things to consider while occupying the parent/caregiver role. Common and important themes include:

- Two common emotions parents/caregivers experience is guilt and shame. Guilt and shame tend to hinder parents from getting involved in treatment and are unnecessary emotional burdens. Serious mental disorders are typically the result of brain-based and biological factors that are beyond a parent and/or their child's control. While it's the parent's responsibility to help get the best care for their child, parents tend to take the burden of guilt. To successfully seek out and obtain care for your child you must be willing to be honest with your family/supports and child about the diagnosis so everyone can support treatment in a healthy and productive way.
- Give yourself and everyone a break. You, your providers, your child, and your family are all going to make mistakes. There is much we are still learning about how to respond to each child's unique needs. Take a breath, speak up when you have a concern, resolve the problem, and then get back to it. This is a great lesson for a child.
- Educate yourself from reliable sources about your child's diagnosis. While not all children experience the same mental illness in the same way, being able to anticipate possible symptoms and treatment recommendations provides reassurance that there is light at the end of the tunnel.
- Remember, not all mental illnesses are the same. Some can be treated and, with good self-care, may not return. Others will be life-long, with reoccurring symptoms that require ongoing services to manage symptoms. In all cases, even individuals with the most serious mental illnesses can substantially improve their health and wellness and lead meaningful, productive, and happy lives.
- Ask good questions. Science about treating mental illness has improved over the past decade. If your provider is not using evidenced-based treatment, ask why. There may be a good reason, or you may opt for a second opinion. If you are exhausted and need more support than what your family and community can provide, consider asking your provider about respite services or some other higher level of care for your child. Don't try to be superhuman - it could be dangerous.

Taking Care of Yourself

Taking care of yourself helps your child's recovery because it demonstrates that things like rest, socializing and eating well are key to overall health and wellness. It also helps you to be at your best when your child needs it and helps prevent responding in an emotional or fatigued state. Here are some tips:

- Think small. Even regular, brief walks, short conversations, and an occasional night out with friends can make a difference.
- Get help from trustworthy friends and family. It gives them something important to contribute and makes them feel helpful.
- Find a local parent support group. Two such organizations, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Mental Health America (MHA), have local organizations across the country. Some churches, behavioral health organizations and hospitals also have these types of groups. Services are usually free and offer support that both parents, siblings and extended family members find helpful. They



also can help you with understanding and addressing the financial burdens that come along with treating a serious illness. If a support group is not your style, consider finding your own therapist for support and guidance.

- Nurture, praise, and support, but do not overprotect your child. Set clear limits and reinforce them as consistently as possible. Children learn quickly and if caregivers do difficult things for them, they will let them. However, this prevents your child from learning much needed coping skills and reinforces manipulative behavior. The line between appropriately protecting and ensuring safety can be a fine one, but with help from your treatment providers, you can figure it out.
- Take care of your relationships. A high number of parents report that their marriages and significant relationships suffer as result of caring for a child with mental illness. Nurturing these relationships is as important as nurturing your child. Not doing so can create anger and resentment and, in the end, could rob the whole family of the very things that brings them strength and joy.
- Prepare for transitioning to adulthood. As adolescents become adults, it can be especially challenging for both parents and child. Reinforcing their independence and responsibility is especially important during this time. Some failures are going to happen. With support and encouragement, these can be the basis for new learning and the development of resiliency.

Your Life Advisor EAP

Although caring for a child with mental health struggles can be taxing, your Life Advisor EAP has multiple supports to assist with and provide resources to help you achieve a well-balanced lifestyle. The supports include counseling which could be an emotional outlet to process difficult situations, coaching that can address and offer ways to respond to undesirable emotions that may arise while caring for a child with mental illness, resources that may address and/or be a solution to providing support to a child with emotional struggle, and a great discount program that has many social activities to implement a little fun to ensure a healthy work-life balance, plus tips through live webinars, articles, and newsletters to help with well-being based on the 5 domains of wellness: Physical, Emotional, Financial, Career and Community.

**For more information, tools, resources, or app information, call your
Life Advisor Employee Assistance Program!**



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for you & your family.**

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