

# CARING FOR A PARENT WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

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**“When Mum  
got sick  
we didn’t  
know where  
to get help”**

## In Australia it is estimated that just over a million children live in a household where at least one parent has a mental illness<sup>1</sup>.

Growing up in any family can be challenging at times, but there will likely be additional problems for families in which one or both parents have a mental illness.

*“I was nine years old. We didn’t understand what was happening, and didn’t know who to call, except Dad, but we didn’t know where he was or how to ring him. We were scared of Mum and what she might do. You are unsure who to trust. You don’t know who is telling the truth. You love your Mum and want to believe her, even though what she is saying sounds a bit weird. But if you don’t believe your mother you feel guilty and you feel like you are deceiving her.”*

## What are the challenges for a young carer?

As a young carer, you may have had to take over many of the adult responsibilities associated with parenting and managing a household. Such things might include taking care of younger brothers and sisters, grocery shopping or paying bills.

You may not always be able to receive the care and support from your parent that you need or would like. There are likely to be

disruptions to the family when your parent becomes ill and might need to stay in hospital.

If you do not understand your parent’s illness, and even if you do, you may feel guilty that somehow through your behaviour or the things you say you are the reason they became ill.

## Your parent's mental health and wellbeing is never your fault.

If your parent has a mental illness you may be vulnerable to stigma, rejection and a lack of understanding from people at your school and in the community. Other people's limitations and fear can make you feel like you are isolated and that you want to withdraw from the people around you.

When a parent has a mental illness, seeking and holding down a job might be difficult. Unemployment

may lead to further problems for the family and this could put even more stress on everyone.

This may also result in the possibility of you having some troubles at school. You might find it hard to concentrate on your schoolwork. Taking on more responsibilities at home might also disturb your sleep at night and you might start feeling that you are not like the other children.



## Looking after your needs

If your parent needs to go to hospital, you may need to have someone care for you or help you look after your brothers and sisters. Having another trusted adult would ensure the least disruption to your home and school life.

You may not understand what is happening at the times when your parent is ill. Finding out about your parent's illness can help you make sense of what's going on. There are many ways to find information about your parent's illness.

It is okay and important for you to talk to someone other than your parent about your fears, guilt and confusion.

You may need to meet and talk with other young people who also have parents with a mental illness.

## How can you help yourself?

### **Acknowledge that you have a parent with a mental illness and what effects this might have on you.**

- Remember that you are not responsible for causing your parent's problems.
- It's OK to acknowledge your feelings of shame, guilt and anger.
- Remember you are not responsible for what other people think or feel.

### **Develop new ways of taking care of yourself.**

- It's OK to recognise your own needs and take care of them.
- Develop strategies for coping and reducing the stress in your life. You could chat to a trusted friend, relative or a teacher at school.
- Have interests outside of the family.

### **Develop new ways of relating to others.**

- Recognise that relationships don't have to be defined by crisis or dependency.

## **Educate yourself about your parent's illness.**

- This will help you to understand what might have caused the problems for your parent.
- Consider seeing your own support person such as a counsellor or psychologist.
- Talking to someone outside the family can help you understand how your parent's illness impacts on your life and how you can deal with that.

## **Join a support group or a peer support program.**

- A support group may enable you to reduce your feelings of isolation.
- Peer support will provide you with a support network of young people in similar circumstances and help you learn strategies for dealing with confusing and difficult situations.

## **Reference**

1. Maybery D, Reupert A, et al. (2005) VicHealth Research Report on Children at Risk in Families affected by Parental Mental Illness. Melbourne, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)



# Where do I go for help?

## The WayAhead Directory

is an online resource providing a comprehensive list of mental health related services in NSW.

[www.WayAhead.org.au](http://www.WayAhead.org.au)

## Phone Lines

**WayAhead Mental Health Information Line**

**1300 794 991**

Your Local doctor (GP)

**Call 000 - If you feel scared or unsafe**

**KidsHelp Line**

1800 551 800

**SANE Helpline (M-F 9am-5pm)**

1800 187 263



Translating & Interpreting Service  
(TIS) 131 450

Please call the WayAhead Information Line through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Free to Australian citizens or permanent residents.

## Websites

**Mental Health Carers ARAFMI**

[arafmi.org](http://arafmi.org)

1800 655 298

**Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI)**

[www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)

02 8838 6262

**On Fire Program:**

[sfnsw.org.au/On-Fire/Home](http://sfnsw.org.au/On-Fire/Home)

02 9879 2600

supports young people  
8-17 years of age.

**SANE**

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

**Young Carers Australia**

[youngcarers.net.au](http://youngcarers.net.au)

**ReachOut**

[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

## Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed.

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The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

*This factsheet was last reviewed by Mental Health Carers ARAFMI, 2015*

**“ I found people who  
understood exactly what I was  
going through ”**



