

Online supplement

Mental illness in your family

Notes to assist professionals in discussion with children. The notes can be used verbatim or as part of explanations constructed by the professional.

Why is mental illness difficult?

Illness in parents is always difficult, because the person who is there to look after you suddenly can't do it, and you may have to be the 'carer' – the one who does the looking after – instead. This is always a bit confusing, but when a parent has a mental illness this can be even more confusing because:

- 1 she or he may not look ill or need to go to bed, although she or he may often (in some illnesses) not feel very energetic and look and behave tired
- 2 the illness can effect how your Mum or Dad thinks and feels about many things
- 3 this change in his or her feelings may affect you, and make you wonder whether it was because of something you did.

This leaflet is to help you answer some of the many questions you are sure to have if you have a parent with a mental illness. It will explain about mental illness, why it happens – as far as we know that – and what can help if you are living with someone who is mentally ill.

What is mental illness?

All of us face problems in life at some time. Sometimes they can make us upset, such as sad, angry or depressed. All of us get depressed or unhappy and miserable at some time, but it usually passes in a few hours or a day or two. When it doesn't or when there are things making us too anxious or too upset to manage, then a more 'stuck' depression can set in, or a person can become worried about many things, some of which may not really matter. That person may even worry about silly little things that you or even he or she would laugh about another time. Their sleep may be disrupted. They may even feel a bit ill physically or have headaches or other pains. Other ways that the same kind of worries can show themselves are worrying about food or not being able to concentrate.

These are mental health problems which can generally be overcome if the person who suffers

them can find someone to talk to who understands these things. Most people get through these times by talking with their families or friends, or – if they are younger – with teachers and youth workers. Sometimes, people who are feeling like this may need to talk to a specialist or even take some medicine to help.

It is when these problems get a bit out of hand that people can begin to behave in rather extreme ways; sometimes not eating, hurting themselves or behaving in ways which seem to be against other people.

How do people with a mental illness feel?

Sometimes depression gets bad so that the person can't sleep properly, loses his or her appetite and doesn't enjoy anything.

Sometimes the person worries so much that he or she doesn't go out, can't sleep and feels anxious all the time that bad things will happen.

Sometimes the person gets thoughts about keeping everything in order and has to do things, like activities such as too much washing, which he or she may believe will stop bad things from happening. These are called obsessive thoughts.

Sometimes the person can behave in a way that seems as if he or she doesn't care about anyone else and just wants to have things their way. This might mean that the person upsets other people but it may be that really he or she feels very unhappy inside himself or herself, without really knowing why.

Sometimes when a person gets ill, things can go beyond what we can normally understand. A person's behaviour as well as what they say may seem to just not make any sense.

The reason this happens is usually a mixture of different things: the way people are built or made up (such as what they inherit in their genes), but this is always affected by how they live their lives (including stresses and strains such as losing a job or splitting up with a partner); and the kind of the life they had lived when they were growing up. It can also happen because their mind or brain gets overloaded – that is, it cannot cope with or manage

all the things going into it. We don't exactly know why this happens to some people, but there are some ideas below.

How does mental illness happen?

Although some kinds of worries and anxieties can make it worse, worries on their own cannot make a person have mental illness. It seems to happen when a part of them feels especially weak (something in the brain), and then some special stresses are added which they cannot cope with.

The picture below (Fig. DS1) is one way which might help you to understand it.

Here's a brain inside the body. The blue lines are nerves which send messages to your muscles so you can move. They are called motor nerves. The red lines are also nerves, but they send messages back to the brain so you can feel what is happening. They are called sensory nerves.

Try this experiment. Close your eyes and make your arm and hand do several different movements. Then, before you open your eyes, guess where the end of your finger tips will be. Open your eyes and see if you were right. Then close your eyes again and touch your left ear with your right hand. Did you manage it? If you did, it shows that the

nerves you used are working well together. Your motor nerves told your hand where to go, but your sensory nerves told your brain where your hand was going. That's good coordination. So the brain talks to the body and the body talks to the brain. Well, the same thing also happens between the brain and the mind – or what you think.

You can make your brain concentrate on one thing or another, but if you try to think about too many things you can get very muddled and often can't concentrate on any one of them. That's why teachers often want to stop children from talking in class or from looking out of the window. But most of us are really good at focusing even if there are lots of things going on.

Try this experiment with three or more friends. Stand in a room and all talk at once. The amount of sound will be all the noise each one of you made added up. One friend should be selected (without the others knowing) to keep saying the name of one of the others, but no louder than the others. He or she will probably hear their name quite soon, even though the other sounds are louder. This is because our brains can sift out/sieve out/filter out (whichever words you like best) the things we need to pay attention to. Otherwise our minds would be overloaded and couldn't work at all. We think that there is a part of the brain which does this job. But when someone has a severe mental illness they often can't choose what to hear, so they hear everything. So you can see how their mind could then become very jumbled up and have strange thoughts and ideas which don't fit. This can happen for three main reasons.

- 1 Their brain is just having to cope with too many ideas, worries, feelings and everything, so that it just can't filter out what is important.
- 2 In the person's early life they have had just too many things to cope with, so that they have too many feelings and ideas going round and round inside their mind to cope with any new ones.
- 3 The bit of the brain that does the sifting out or filtering is not working properly. We do not know exactly why that happens to some people, but that part of the brain does seem to be a bit weaker in some families. That does not mean that those people will get a mental illness, because it needs the other stresses for that to happen; and anyway, there are ways to protect your brain from 'overload'. In fact, if your parent has had a severe mental illness, it is likely that he or she will have been given medication, and that medication will often be aimed at helping the brain to 'filter' in order to cope.

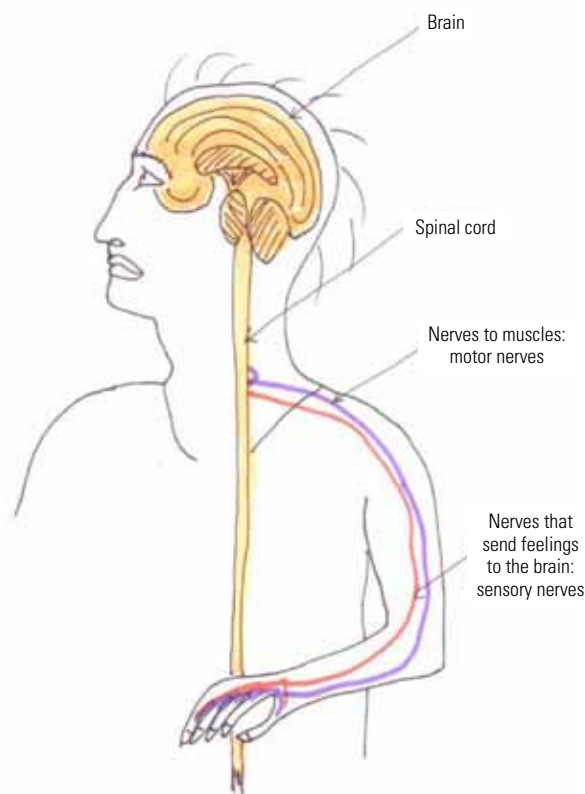


FIG DS1 The brain and spinal cord.

Will I inherit mental illness from my relative?

Everyone has episodes in their lives which could trigger stress responses or make existing problems worse. Some of us cope better than others, a fact which depends on many things about our biological makeup and what happens in our early lives. Although 1 in 4 of us may one day have some sort of diagnosable mental health problem in our lifetime, very few of us will have a serious mental illness. Even if both your parents have mental illness, you are still much more likely not to have mental illness yourself than you are to have it. If you are worried at any time that you may have symptoms, it is sensible to go straight away to your general practitioner (GP). Starting treatment early can really help in terms of keeping you well and able to function normally. However, talking to someone who you trust about the feelings inside you can help to protect you.

Will I get mentally ill from doing drugs?

There is still no evidence that says that drugs actually cause permanent mental illness. What looks to be more likely is that heavy drug use, and that includes alcohol, could affect your memory permanently. It is unwise to use cannabis heavily in your teenage years if you have a family member who has mental health problems, particularly schizophrenia, as some research studies show close

links in these cases. There are other resources you can find which explain more about this

Who can I go to if I am worried about my relative's mental health?

Often people who are mentally ill either don't realise that they are getting ill or don't want people to know about it – so they try their best to manage. This can put an enormous strain on the other members of the family. You can always go to your GP, but she or he may not be able to do anything against the wishes of your relative, unless they are becoming a danger to you and others. If this is the case, don't hesitate to ask for help.

You can also ask Social Services to help. People worry that involving Social Services will mean that they are taken away from their parents, but this is the last thing social workers want to do. They will want to help you to manage in your own home, with the support of other members of your family.

You may feel very stressed out by your relative's illness and the behaviour it produces. School nurses or school counsellors can be very helpful in talking all this through with you and being there if you need to get things off your chest.

If at any time you feel really frightened by your relative's behaviour and you are unable to contact a doctor or a social worker, you should dial 999. You may feel bad about this but it could be the only way to get the help your relative needs.