



ARAFMI

Mental Health Carers
ARAFMI NSW Inc
Hunter Region

Children of Parents with Mental Illness



Health
Hunter New England
Local Health District

Navigators Guide

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When one person in a family has a mental illness, other family members are affected in their own way. Children are affected differently to adults and have a different level of understanding. It is important they get the support and attention they need. Sometimes adults can be so upset themselves that they may not realise the impact on children. Children may feel angry, isolated, confused or guilty but not be able to talk easily about their feelings.

It is important to be alert to the needs of children and for signs they may not be coping. Taking the time to talk to children about what they are feeling or thinking and to let them know people care about them is important to help them cope.

Ways to support children

If a parent has a mental illness then other family members and friends need to give children the care and support they need:

- explain what is happening to their family and the parent who has an illness at a level that children and young people can understand
- ensure children have regular contact with the family member with a mental illness if appropriate (speak to staff or doctors if the person with an illness is not well enough to see the children)
- visit the family member in hospital when they are well enough to maintain a relationship
- ensure children have a stable home life and familiar routine – children need to still act like children even in a crisis
- encourage them to spend time with their friends, go out and play as normal, and ensure they don't think they have to take on the responsible role of an adult

- be aware of feelings children feel which may be resentment, anger or confusion and help them express those feelings
- reassure children that they are loved and supported
- have a plan in place that includes children's care details and details of people in the child's support system (such as school, counsellor, family, doctor)

YP-COPMI (Young People – Children of Parents with a Mental Illness) supports children and young people of parents who have a mental illness and have been referred through the Community Mental Health Team. YP-COPMI educates and assists adult mental health clinicians in working with families involving a parent with a mental illness. The service is part of CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service). For more information speak with the social worker attached to the inpatient unit, the COPMI nurse with one of the community mental health teams or contact the co-ordinator of YP-COPMI on (02) 4925 7800.

Useful information and brochures can be downloaded from the COPMI website www.copmi.net.au. The 'Family Talk' brochure is good for children and contains essential tips and information for families where a parent has a mental illness.

Signs to watch for

Children may express their feelings and fears in a variety of ways. The changes may be sudden or gradual and because children may not have the words or understanding to express themselves fully, it is important to be aware of the signs.



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- **Behaving** – acting out, acting younger, anxiety, attention seeking, withdrawing from other people etc
- **Physical signs** – nausea, headaches, stomach aches, sleep disturbances etc
- **Thinking** – attention and concentration problems, confusion, poor memory, pre-occupied, distracted, active fantasy life etc

- teenagers may prefer just to be with friends having fun
- parents and families benefit from learning about their illness and ways they can manage mental health problems - healthy living and exercise
- seek professional support to assist parenting skills or join a support group beneficial to both parents and children
- develop a plan and prepare children for what might happen if a parent or family member becomes unwell
- communicate with children so they understand at their level
- gather information on support groups for children or relevant books/websites to help them understand and relate to other children in similar situations

Websites for parents

www.copmi.net.au

www.families.nsw.gov.au

Websites for carers

www.arafmihunter.org

www.carersnsw.asn.au

Websites for children and young people

www.headspace.org.au

www.headroom.net.au

www.reachout.com.au

www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

www.kidshelp.com.au

www.itsallright.org

Role of parents and families¹

Parents need to plan to ensure children are supported and cared for, particularly in time of crisis. Some important things to consider:

- children need time out just as much as adults - Enrol preschoolers in regular childcare and young children in activities eg. sport or music

¹ See Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services NG7 and Young Carers NG17

Important contact numbers

Your local GP

24 Hour Emergency Mental Health Line –
Freecall 1800 655 085

Kids Helpline – Freecall 1800 551 800

EDuCARE – Freecall 1300 887 776

Commonwealth Respite Carelink Centre
Freecall 1800 052 222 (Business Hours)
Freecall 1800 059 059 (After Hours)

Mental Health Carers ARAFMI NSW Inc
(Hunter Region) – (02) 4961 6717

Carers NSW – Freecall 1800 242 636

Carer Assist (Newcastle) – (02) 4968 9268

Child and Family Health – (02) 4924 6400

Family Support Service Newcastle –
(02) 4926 3577

NSW Domestic Violence Line –
Freecall 1800 656 463

Lifeline – 131 114