

How to
cope as a parent with
a mental health problem



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This booklet is for anyone who is a parent living with a mental health problem. It suggests what you can do to help yourself and your children, and explains what support is available. It also includes information for friends and family.

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How might my mental health problem affect me?

Many people worry that it will be difficult to cope with parenting if they have a mental health problem. It is natural to be concerned about the impact this will have on you and your children.

However, with the right support and resources, it is perfectly possible to be a good parent while managing a mental health problem, and to care for and support your children in a positive way.

All parents face challenges, but if you are coping with a mental health problem, you may face additional difficulties. For example:

- A mental health problem can make it more difficult to cope with the day-to-day challenges of parenting – for example, anxiety may make you more easily worried, or depression may mean that you have low energy.
- You may worry about the impact your mental health problem will have on your child – for example, they may experience stress or mental health problems themselves.
- You or your child may have difficulties because of other people's negative ideas about mental health problems – for example, people may judge your parenting abilities because you have a mental health problem, or your child may be bullied or teased.
- If your child has to take on responsibilities around the home to help you, such as preparing food or getting younger siblings ready for school, this may have an impact on their schoolwork or the amount of free time they have to play or see their friends.

- You may find it hard to seek help, because you are worried that people may see you as a less capable parent, and put pressure on yourself to cope for longer than you are able.
- There may be times where you become unwell and can't carry out your usual parenting responsibilities, or have to go into hospital. This can cause practical issues, and cause stress and worry for you and your family.

It can be easy to blame any difficulties you have as a parent on your mental health problems, or try to over-compensate by becoming a 'perfect parent'. However, it's important to remember that all parents have difficult times and there is no such thing as being perfect. Try not to put too much pressure on yourself or give yourself too much of a hard time.

💡💡 *Sometimes it's hard to remember that you can't do everything exactly right. I do worry about whether my mental health problem makes me a less useful mum to my son. My partner always reminds me that no one's perfect and I work really hard for my son.* 💡💡

💡💡 *There is so much taboo still as you worry people will think you're not a fit mum. In fact I think you try extra hard to be a good parent.* 💡💡

What can I do to help myself?

Parenting with a mental health problem can be difficult and there is no one solution that will make it easier to cope. This section suggests several things you can try that might help.

Look after your mental health

Learning to manage your mental health problem is a key part of helping yourself to cope as a parent. If you take positive steps to manage your mental health, you are more likely to stay well and be able to cope with the day-to-day demands of being a parent. This could be a combination of self-help strategies, such as doing regular exercise or going to a support group, and working out what treatment works for you. (See Mind's booklet *How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing* for tips to help you stay mentally well, and our *Understanding* series for information about treatment options for different conditions.)

Seek help if you need it

There may be times when you are finding it difficult to cope as a parent and need additional support. Seeking help for a mental health problem may feel scary, particularly if it is for the first time, and you may be concerned that you will be judged or that people will think you are a bad parent.

However, seeking help is often the first step towards addressing and dealing with mental health problems which, in the long-term, is one of the most positive things you can do. Trying to cope for longer than you are able can cause your mental health to deteriorate and lead to more problems in the long-term. (See 'What support is available?' on p.13 for details of the type of support you might be offered.)

●● *Becoming a parent was the best thing that ever happened to me because it forced me to face my mental health problems and deal with them.* ●●

Be organised

Being organised about daily tasks can help reduce stress and make them easier to manage. For example:

- Having a daily childcare routine and setting regular times for routine tasks like mealtimes, baths and bedtimes can help to fit the day's tasks into a clear structure and make them seem less daunting.
- Organising other aspects of day-to-day life, such as planning meals or writing shopping lists you can re-use, can reduce stress and help you carry on at times when you find things more difficult.

If you have periods when you are unwell or find it more difficult to cope, you may find it helpful to think in advance about how you could reduce some of your responsibilities during these times. This can reduce stress and give you some time to focus on feeling better.

There are several ways you might be able to do this, depending on your circumstances. For example, you may be able to:

- organise for your children to go to an after-school club, nursery or a childminder
- get older children to use public transport or a taxi to get to school or after-school activities
- employ a cleaner on a temporary basis
- ask for help from friends, family or other parents (see below).

Get a support network in place

Support from other people can be a powerful tool to help you cope. Try to let people know early if you are becoming unwell or finding it hard to cope, so they are able to support you before things become too difficult. If you have a set routine of when and how things are done (see above), this can make it easier to ask others to take responsibility for particular parts of your daily routine if you become unwell.

How to cope as a parent with a mental health problem

For example:

- **Friends or family members** could help you with practical responsibilities, such as providing childcare, helping with transport or cooking meals, and provide emotional support if you are finding things difficult.
- **Your children's school, nursery or childminder** could keep an eye out for any problems your child may be having, such as issues with behaviour or bullying.
- **Other parents** may be able to help out with certain responsibilities, such as taking children to school or nursery, in exchange for you helping them out another time.
- **Your employer** may be able to help you manage the demands of working and looking after a family, such as allowing you to work flexible hours. (See Mind's booklet *How to be mentally healthy at work* for more information.)

Once you have worked out who can do what, keep a list of the names and phone numbers of people who can help, and what they can do, so you can contact them easily when you need to (see 'Checklist and planning resources' on p.21).

Talking about mental health

Talking to people honestly about your mental health problem, and letting them know what they can do to help, can help them understand your situation and how best they can support you.

However, talking about mental health problems can be difficult, and you may be worried about other people's reactions. It is a good idea to think about who and how much you want to tell, and consider the risks and benefits of talking to someone before you make a decision to do this. Remember that it is up to you to decide who you tell about your mental health problems, and you should never be made to feel that you have to explain more than you feel comfortable with.

If you would like to talk to someone about your mental health problem, but are finding it difficult to start a conversation, you might find that an anti-stigma campaign, such as Time to Change, can give you ideas about how to do this. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)

Plan for times when you are unwell

Even if you do your best to manage your mental health, there may be times when you become unwell and are unable to care for your children. Planning in advance for these times can reduce stress and worry about what will happen and minimise any disruption to your children's lives.

It's a good idea to plan the following while you are well:

- Decide with any partner, friends or relatives who will do what for your children if you become very ill and are unable to care for them.
- Have a clear plan about who will look after your children and what responsibility they will have (for example, if your children will go and stay with them or if they will come to your house).
- If you are a single parent, it is particularly important to decide who will take over your role as the legal, responsible parent if you are unwell.

Crisis planning

A mental health crisis is when you become very unwell and need urgent help. As you may not be able to make decisions during a crisis, you might want to consider making an advance statement. This is a document you write while you are well, explaining what you would like to happen if you are in crisis. While not always legally binding, they set out your views and preferences on a range of things, like treatment or domestic arrangements. You can find more information about the different types of advance statements and how to get one in Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to crisis services*.

Hospital admission

If there is a chance you may be admitted to hospital during a crisis, you might also find it useful to plan the following:

- Check and write down visiting hours of local hospitals.
- Decide whether you want your children to visit you in hospital or not, and arrange with someone to bring your children to visit if you do.
- Explain to your children in advance that you might have to go to hospital and what will happen while you are there, to help them feel more prepared.

What can I do to help my children?

Many parents who have a mental health problem worry about how this might affect their children. This section suggests a few things that you can try to help reduce any impact that your mental health problem may have on your children.

Talk to your child honestly about your mental health problem

Talking to your child honestly about your mental health can reduce any fear or confusion they may be feeling, and help them understand your actions and behaviour.

👉👉 *Sometimes they may get snapped at due to anxiety but I am quick... to say sorry and explain why.* 👉👉

It's important that the information you give your child is clear and appropriate to their age and understanding. Before you talk to your child, you may find it helpful to discuss how to do this with a trusted friend, relative or support worker first. A young person's charity, such as Young Carers or Childline (see 'Useful contacts' on p.24) should also be able to give you information and advice about this, or may be able to answer your child's questions directly.

Keep track of their mental wellbeing

It is a good idea to keep track of your child's wellbeing, to make sure that they are OK and that their own mental health is not being affected. If you keep an eye on how they are, you will be able to notice if they are having difficulties and deal with any issues quickly.

There are several ways you can keep track of how your child is feeling:

- Talk to older children about how they are feeling and let them know you are available to listen to them if they are having problems. If your children feel comfortable discussing their feelings and problems with you, they are more likely to ask you for help if they need it.
- Keep an eye out for changes in your child's behaviour, such as becoming quiet and withdrawn, not participating in activities they usually enjoy, or becoming angry or aggressive. Children may not be able to express their feelings, particularly if they are very young, so they may show any difficult emotions through their behaviour.
- Make sure you attend any parents' evenings regularly, at school, nursery or any after-school clubs – your child's teachers should have a good idea of how your child is coping and can let you know if there are any issues. If you can't go, make arrangements for a trusted relative or friend to go on your behalf.
- Ask people you trust to keep an eye on your child's wellbeing as well. Close friends and family members can let you know if your child appears different and may notice things you don't.
- If your child doesn't feel comfortable discussing their feelings with you, perhaps identify a trusted teacher, friend or family member that they can talk to if they feel worried.

If you are concerned that your child is having problems with their own mental health, you might want to take them to see a GP. A GP will be able to assess them, let you know if there are any issues, and discuss any treatment or support your child might need.

Make sure caring responsibilities don't get too much

If your child has responsibilities around the home, such as looking after the household shopping money, or helping you with your basic needs such as washing, dressing or taking medication, try to keep track of how much they are doing and make sure that this isn't having a negative impact on them.

Some things to keep track of are:

- **stress** – if a child has more responsibilities than they feel capable of taking on, stress can affect their mental and physical health
- **studying** – children need to feel they have enough time for schoolwork
- **social life** – having enough time and energy to have fun with friends is important
- **rest** – children need time to rest and 'do nothing'. They may become tired and resentful if they have too many 'grown up' things to do.

If you are concerned that your child's caring responsibilities are having a negative impact on them, a charity such as Young Carers may be able to offer advice and support about what you can do to help. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)

What support is available?

If you are parenting with a mental health problem, there may be times when you need additional support to help you cope.

If you are finding it hard to get the help you need, you might find it useful to get an advocate to support you. An advocate can listen and speak for you when this is helpful. You can find an advocate by contacting the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) via the NHS choices website. Some local Minds also run advocacy services. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)

Mental health services

There are a range of mental health services that might be able to support you as a parent.

For example:

- **a GP** – can offer regular appointments and provide information and advice about options for ongoing treatment and support
- **a health visitor** – offers support, advice and information on parenting young children while managing your mental health
- **a community mental health team (CMHT)** – offers intensive support to help you manage your mental health problem more effectively and cope better as a parent
- **a parent and baby unit** – offers a place where you can look after your baby, under the care of a specialist mental health team, while being treated for a mental health problem.

👩👧 *I was very grateful for the support of a perinatal mental health team and their mother and baby unit which helped give me the bond with my son I so desperately sought.* 👩👧

If you would like to access a mental health service, talk to your GP or a mental health worker. They should be able to tell you what support is available and can refer you to a local service.

Social care

If you are finding it difficult to cope with certain responsibilities as a parent, you may be eligible for social care support to help you stay well and care for your children.

Services that may be provided could include help with:

- managing money, such as budgeting or paying the bills
- housework, such as cleaning, cooking or shopping
- using local services, such as peer support groups, employment services, or day centres
- transport, such as using a taxi, minibus or bus pass to attend appointments or services
- training in parenting skills
- managing relationships, such as relationships with friends, family or neighbours
- aids and adaptations to your home or help with mobility issues
- personal care, such as washing or dressing
- benefits and housing, such as help with applications, attending appointments or getting advice or information
- accessing or staying in training, education or employment
- support from a specialist social worker or support worker
- support for your child, such as supervised youth clubs or day trips.

Local authorities have a duty to provide social care for families with children 'in need' under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. This automatically includes disabled children. A social worker can make a formal assessment of whether this applies to you and your family and, if so, what support you might be entitled to.

If you think that social care would be helpful for you, you can ask your GP or a mental health worker to refer you for an assessment. You can also contact your local authority (council) yourself to discuss what support you might be entitled to and request an assessment. (See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to community-based mental health and social care* for more information.)

Care Programme Approach

If you are being treated through the Care Programme Approach (CPA), any health and social care needs you have as a parent should be considered as part of this and the needs of your children should also be fully assessed. (See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to community-based mental health and social care* for more information.)

Charities and voluntary organisations

Voluntary mental health organisations, such as your local Mind, may offer services that might be able to help you. This could be counselling that focuses on your needs as a parent, or peer support groups where you can meet and exchange experiences with other parents. Some family charities, such as Family Action, also offer specialist support services for parents with a mental health problem. You can find out what support is available in your area by searching online, getting in touch with the Mind Infoline or contacting your local Mind (see 'Useful contacts' on p.24).

Children's services

There are various services and organisations that may be able to help children who are having difficulties (see 'Useful contacts' on p.24).

For example:

- A young person's mental health charity, such as Young Minds, can give advice, support and information for you and your child.
- Helpline services, such as the NSPCC's Childline, are available to speak to young people about any issues they may be facing, including about their own or your mental health.
- Some children's charities, such as Barnardo's, offer support to children with mental health problems, including drop-in centres where children can go and talk to a specialist support worker.





To find out what support is available in your area, search online or talk to a relevant professional, such as a teacher or your GP.

Can my children be taken into care?

Many people worry that their child will be taken into care if they are parenting with a mental health problem. This can be distressing, and can cause stress and worry for you and your family. This section explains more about when children could be taken into care and what would happen.

If you are concerned that your child might be taken into care, there are several important points to remember:

- **Children are only taken into care in extreme circumstances** – this will only happen if other forms of support haven't worked, or if social services feel you cannot keep your children safe.
- **Being in contact with social services doesn't mean your child will be taken into care** – social services can provide a wide range of support to help you look after your children yourself, and for many parents, this is a positive experience.
- **If your child is taken into care, it doesn't mean it is permanent** – care is often temporary until you are well enough to look after them yourself again.
- **Your child can't be taken into care straight away** – you would receive many warnings and be given months of notice that the care process is beginning.

  *I was worried for a very long time if I admitted to my GP that I was suffering from depression and anxiety again they would take my child away... In fact, she helped me get home visits from a counsellor and medication to help me get better.*  

If there is a chance your child may be taken into care, social services will follow the following process:

- You will receive informal warnings that this might happen from a social worker or health professional.
- You will receive a 'letter before proceedings' telling you that social workers are worried about your child and what they want you to do to show that you can look after him or her.
- You will attend a 'pre-proceedings meeting' where social workers can further explain what you need to do to look after your child. This could include how you will get additional support for your mental health problems.
- You will have some time to show that you can keep to the agreement made at the pre-proceedings meeting. Your social worker will let you know how things are going and may hold more formal review meetings with you.
- If social workers are still worried about your child, you will go to court, possibly a number of times, and the court will decide whether your child should be taken into care.

If your child may be taken into care, it's essential that you get support:

- Make sure you are aware of your **legal rights** – information is available on the Gov.uk and Citizens Advice websites. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)
- **Get a solicitor** to help you with the legal process – ask your social worker how to do this or check the Gov.uk website. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)

- Make sure you get **continued mental health support** to manage your mental health – talk to your GP or community mental health team (CMHT) about what might help.
- Make sure that you understand any **treatment plan** your social worker has given you – talk to your social worker, GP or a mental health worker if you don't understand or disagree with any part it.
- You may want to contact a **support charity** for families involved with social services, such as the Family Rights Group, for information and advice. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)
- You may also benefit from a **talking treatment** to help you deal with any difficult feelings you have. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments*.)

What can friends and family do to help?

This section is for friends and family who want to support someone who is parenting with a mental health problem.

Support from friends and family is very helpful when looking after children. This is particularly true if someone is unwell.

Offer practical help

There are many things you could do to provide support for someone. For example, you could offer to help with:

- day-to-day tasks like transport, childcare, housework or shopping
- organising parenting responsibilities, such as working out a daily routine or identifying the most important tasks
- acting as an emergency contact who can have the children to stay at short notice or help with basic tasks if your friend or family member becomes unwell.

Ask your friend or family member how you can help – they will know what's best for them.

●● *[I find that] adult company helps if you're home alone with young children.* ●●

If your friend or relative is more seriously ill, you may have to decide whether to do things for them, possibly including looking after the children for a bit, or to keep encouraging them to try to carry on themselves. There are no easy answers to this situation. It will help if you can find someone who you can discuss these and other issues with and who may be able to share the responsibility with you.

Be supportive and understanding

If your family member is finding it hard to look after their family, they may worry that they will be judged or criticised if they ask for help, so it's important to be supportive and reassure them it's OK. Encourage them to be open about their mental health problem, so that they feel comfortable coming to you if they need support.

Having someone to talk to can be extremely helpful, and you can provide support, empathy and encouragement if they are finding things hard. You may also be able to help them manage their mental health problem, such as helping them recognise when they might be becoming unwell or help identifying triggers. Ask them how they are if you feel they are not coping – they may not know how to ask for help.

Help them seek support

If you feel that your friend or family member might need additional support, you could support them to get help. For example, you could research what is available or act as an advocate to help them get the support they need. (See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to advocacy*.)

If you're concerned for a child's safety

If you are genuinely worried about a child's safety, you may want to talk to your local authority's social services department. This is a very difficult decision to take, and it is likely you will be worried about whether you are doing the right thing and you may feel like you are betraying your friend or family member. If you are unsure about what to do in this situation, you might find it helpful to contact the NSPCC to find out your options and discuss your concerns in confidence. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.24.)

Look after yourself

Supporting a friend or relative experiencing a mental health problem can be difficult, and lead to stress and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. It's important to look after your own mental health. (See Mind's booklet *How to cope as a carer* for more information.)

Checklist and planning resources

Parenting checklist

Use this checklist to remind yourself of the things you have tried and what helps.

	Yes	No
• I take positive steps to look after my mental health.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I can ask for help if I need it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I am organised about daily parenting tasks and have a good routine.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I have a good support network.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know who to ask to help me with day-to-day responsibilities if I need to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I have spoken to my friends and family about what to do if I have a crisis or need to go into hospital.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I have an advance statement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know what professional support is available for me if I'm not coping.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I have spoken to my child about my mental health and they understand my condition.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I keep a close eye on my child's wellbeing and they have someone to talk to if they are worried.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I keep track of my child's caring responsibilities and make sure they aren't getting too much.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know what support is available for my child if they find it difficult to cope.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

People who can help me

Use this space to write a list of people that can help you if you are finding things difficult. Note down their contact details and what they can do.

Friends, family, other parents and teachers

Mental health support (e.g. GP, social worker, children's service)

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

Barnardo's

web: barnardos.org.uk

Support for children experiencing mental health problems and young carers.

Childline

tel: 0800 1111

web: childline.org.uk

Confidential helpline for children and young people in distress.

Citizens Advice

advice lines: tel. 08444 111 444
(England); 0844 477 2020 (Wales)

web: citizensadvice.org.uk

Confidential advice on a range of issues, including legal rights and parenting.

Family Action

web: family-action.org.uk

Services for families, including mental health and young carers' support.

Family Lives

24-hour helpline: 0808 800 2222

web: familylives.org.uk

Information and support for parents and families.

Family Rights Group

helpline: 0808 801 0366

web: frg.org.uk

Support for families whose children are involved with social services.

Gingerbread

helpline: 0808 802 0925

web: gingerbread.org.uk

Advice and practical support for single parents.

Gov.uk

web: gov.uk

Information about public services, including benefits.

Home-Start

freephone: 0800 068 63 68
web: home-start.org.uk
Local support networks for families with young children.

Mumsnet

web: mumsnet.com
Forums about parenting, including parenting and mental health.

NHS Choices

web: nhs.uk
Information about PALS and a search function to find an office in your area.

NSPCC

adult helpline: 0808 800 5000
childline: 0800 1111
web: nspcc.org.uk
Support for children and anyone worried about a child.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris, PO Box 90 90
Stirling FK8 2SA
24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90
email: jo@samaritans.org
web: samaritans.org
24-hour support for anyone experiencing distress, despair or suicidal thoughts.

Time to Change

web: time-to-change.org.uk
Anti-stigma campaign led by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness.

Young Carers

tel: 0844 800 4361
web: youngcarers.net
Support and information for young carers

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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