

Speaking to your children about mental illness

Information for patients receiving mental health care services who are parents of children under the age of 18.

Children under the age of 18 who have a parent receiving help from a district psychiatric center (DPS) are considered 'affected family members.' This applies not only to biological children, but also stepchildren, bonus children and foster children.

In Norway, health personnel have a duty to provide adequate information and necessary follow-up for affected children (Section 10a of the Health Personnel Act).

We know that children will also notice when someone in the family struggles with painful, scary or sad thoughts and feelings – perhaps without realising what it is, or why it happens.



Children notice more than you think. Most everyone in the family cares for and worries about each other – especially when someone is sick. For parents who are struggling emotionally, it can be painful and difficult to feel that you can't manage things for your children.

Talking openly about difficult topics makes it easier to understand and show concern for one another. It can also lead to more good moments together.

Many children and adolescents may think it is their fault that someone in the family is struggling. The truth is, the difficult thoughts and feelings are to blame; no one is at fault. As parents, it is important to talk openly with your kids about difficult topics.

"It's really scary seeing my mom in so much pain ... It feels like my heart is shrinking inside me. Sometimes I want to be close to her all the time. Other times, I stay away as much as possible. There is so little I can do ... and I often cry when I go to bed."

Quote from the booklet "Adults for Children" by Tytti Solantaus and Antonia Ringbom.

This brochure was made by Akershus University Hospital (Ahus) and the municipal health communities cooperation.

How do I talk to my children about mental health issues?

We encourage everyone to talk about mental health issues with their children, as difficult as it may seem. Gaining knowledge about mental health makes it easier to talk with the whole family about difficult topics.

What is the psyche?

The term «psyche» refers to the thoughts and feelings that reside in our brain. Your psyche is unique, and it influences the way you express your thoughts and feelings. Knowing more about mental health can help everyone feel healthy and stay healthy.

Good mental health can be understood as enjoying everyday life, that you feel a sense of belonging and meaning in life, and that you cope with difficult challenges that may arise. How you feel emotionally can change from day to day, and over time. Most people find that their mental health varies throughout their lives.

Mental disorders and diagnoses

- Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, post traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and phobias.

This list contains the names of some mental disorders and diagnoses. They all influence and can change the way you think, feel and act. Living with a mental illness can make you feel incapable of meeting the many expectations and tasks of everyday life.

Mental disorders can be difficult to understand, especially for those who suffer from them. It is not always easy to explain what is happening to you.

Cultural differences

Culture can influence how we talk about mental health. It can be easier for some people to understand and talk about physical injuries, like a broken leg, than to talk about mental health issues.

We can better understand mental disorders if we name them, just as we do with various diseases in the body.

Mental disorders can lead to

- Many negative thoughts about oneself and others
- Life feeling darker, frightening and difficult to live
- Feeling exhausted, getting angry with oneself or others easily, or being sad and worried.
- One may feel very afraid of things that they have not been afraid of before



We know that younger affected family members notice when their parents:

- lose interest in things that used to make them happy while being much sadder than usual
- become afraid and worried about little things that they were not afraid of before
- are afraid to leave the house and would rather be inside alone
- feel more tired than usual and want to lie on the couch a lot
- can't bear to go to work
- unable to eat, or eat a lot and throw it up again
- hurt oneself in different ways because of painful thoughts, feelings
- do the same things over and over again, more often than normal
- more frequent and stronger mood swings than before. For example, being more angry or sad, or if your mood fluctuates from being super-happy to feeling completely miserable
- thinking that you have become magical
- believing that everyone is out to hurt you
- not knowing if what you see or hear is real

Talk to your kids

It is not easy for children to understand that mom or dad's behaviour is due to a mental illness, and we do not always see how worried they are when a family member is sick.

They can be afraid the parent will suffer more if they say something, so they keep their feelings and thoughts to themselves.

In many cultures, talking about disorders in the family is a taboo. Many parents think they are helping their children by not saying anything.

Although children may find it difficult to hear about mental illness, many kids say it is actually a relief for them to understand what is happening around them. A conversation gives them an opportunity to ask questions and talk about it.

When a mother or father acts differently than before, children can wonder if it's because of something they have done wrong.

They may begin to wonder if they might start to struggle in the same way, or if their mother or father will ever be healthy again.

Once they understand more about what is happening, their lives become more predictable and they feel safer. Honesty makes it easier to find ways to enjoy time together, take advantage of the good days and do nice things together. A common understanding and a plan for coping with the difficult days is positive for the whole family.

On the next page you will find tips on what you can say to your children.

What can you say to your children?

When you would like to talk openly to your kids about mental health issues, you can, for example, begin by sharing what you know about the situation.

Then you can ask questions that start with "how" your children experience the situation.

For example, you can say:

"I have been having painful and sad thoughts lately, and have started going to a therapist for help. I'm wondering how you feel, have you noticed that I have changed, and do you have any questions?"

Then invite your children to talk about the situation based on how they experience it. Listen to what your kids say and acknowledge what they are saying. Children feel safe when adults confirm what they say by e.g. giving small nods or friendly glances.

Remember that there is no wrong way to experience a situation. Let your children talk freely about what they are experiencing and avoid correcting what they say. Put away your cell phone and take the time to listen and answer questions they may have.

A good chat can lead to good solutions you hadn't thought of before you had the chance to talk about it.

"My dad has changed. He used to go to football games and cheer me on when I played, now he is mostly home. He sits there looking completely empty and sad, it's hard to watch. Then he blames me for everything, then I feel sad. He said he was going to talk to someone at DPS, so I hope that helps."

Boy, 15 years old



What does DPS do?

At DPS, adults over the age of 18 receive help with their emotional struggles. DPS is also concerned with how the patient's children & family members are doing.

At DPS, people who are struggling have the chance to talk to a therapist or a helper. Individual and group conversations are the most common method of working at DPS. Here the patient receives help to deal with distressing thoughts and feelings, also called mental challenges or disorders.

The therapist and the patient talk about the patient's difficulties. These may be thoughts, feelings or situations at work, in the family or with friends.

The therapist can also use questionnaires or tests. The patient and therapist agree on what they will work on next, and what is important to you as a patient.

Diagnosis

The therapist reviews the notes, tests and forms that were filled out to arrive at what we call a diagnosis. A diagnosis is a name for what the patient is struggling with and that determines what treatment the patient receives.

Treatment

Treatment means that the therapist uses conversations as a method to make you, as a patient, feel better. Some patients are offered medication in addition to talking with a therapist.

Conversation

DPS also offers the opportunity for both parents and children to talk with DPS staff, either with the person undergoing treatment at DPS present, or alone.

In a family conversation, we talk about what DPS can help with, and the family can get more information and ask questions. When your family understands more, it is easier to figure out how to help each other.

Filling out the municipal/district forms

DPS and the municipalities work together to ensure that affected children and young people are taken care of. Patients treated at district psychiatric centers are asked if they have children under the age of 18 with whom they live. If the answer is yes, the therapist will ask for your consent for DPS to send a form to the district or municipality in which you live.

Consent means that the parents and therapist agree on what information is written and shared with the municipality or district, so that affected children can get help. Among other things, the children are offered the chance to talk to a contact person or public health nurse about how they are doing. They can also have their questions about mental health answered.



Services for children and adolescents

Municipalities and districts offer many different services to affected children, including public health clinics and the school health service.

Health clinics

Parents are eligible for services from the public health clinics that follow-up with small children 0-6 years of age. Parents can contact their nearest public health clinic whenever they need to, even outside the regular follow-up appointments that they are offered. The public health clinic offers advice, help and answers to questions about child health and development. All of these services are free of charge.

School health service

School age children from 6-20 (24) years of age are offered health services from their school. Health clinics for adolescents serve youth aged 12 – 20 (24) years.

The school health service offers children and adolescents help from a public health nurse – and in some cases also a school doctor, physiotherapist and psychologist. Children feel seen and heard by the school health service, and various activities are available to learn more about living with mental health issues in the family. They can also talk about what often happens when a family member is struggling emotionally, or has other illnesses.

Children and adolescents can contact the health clinic for adolescents directly by drop-in. They do not need an appointment to talk to a public health nurse or others in the school health service. Public health nurses can also answer questions and talk about whatever the kids may be wondering about.

Talking to a trustworthy and caring professional can often help

They will receive advice and guidance on topics such as body and health, friends or family, difficult thoughts, feelings and concerns. If they need more help, the school health service can put them in contact with their family doctor, a dentist, physiotherapist or psychologist, for example.

The contact person or public health nurse also has an overview of various activities that the municipality or district offers to kids affected by mental health issues that may be suitable for your child. They also have an overview of various services for parents such as parental guidance courses and groups.

Confidentiality

Those who work at the public health clinics and in the school health service are bound by confidentiality. Confidentiality means that healthcare personnel cannot tell anyone why a child or adolescent has been in contact with them, or what they have talked about.

