

Include other adults

By including other adults (i.e. aunts, uncles, school-teacher) it shows your child that it is ok to talk about Mental Health, it's ok to ask for help and it also offers your child an opportunity to talk to someone else about their worries and opinions.

Foster an open relationship

If your child can feel open and safe when discussing Mental Health difficulties with a trusted adult (even if they confide in someone else), they can ask their questions. This will help your child to become more emotionally prepared if you become unwell.

Making a plan

It is so important that a plan is made with your child and time is taken to consider what they need. Discuss with your child (even before a plan is needed) what it is that would help them to cope better if you require a period of time in hospital for your recovery. Include another trusted adult in the plan. Discuss who your child feels safe to talk to, who your child will stay with, when your child can visit etc. Also consider if visits are not appropriate, how you and your child can continue to communicate, e.g. phone calls, letters, pictures etc.

Talk about recovery

Reassure your child when you are experiencing wellness and, even in difficult times, help them to remember that people can manage their Mental Health, and that symptoms and behaviours change for the better too. Allow yourself and your child to enjoy the periods of wellness and refer to them at times of difficulty.

Self-care

It is important to look after your physical and Mental Health and when your child sees this it will reassure them. It also provides a very positive role-model to your child; promoting their help-seeking behaviours at times of need and teaching them to care for their own mental and physical health.

Your local services can be found on:
foroige.ie, hse.ie, tusla.ie

Further supports can be found on:
aware.ie, mentalhealthireland.ie,
yourmentalhealth.ie



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

This leaflet was produced with participation from parents experiencing Mental Health difficulties as part of the Mayo Child and Family Mental Health Initiative

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

This leaflet offers some advice on how you can talk to your children about your Mental Health. Talking to your children will reduce their confusion, let them know they are not to blame, and educate them about your illness and the supports you are accessing.



Be prepared

When you and those close to you understand your difficulties you'll be more comfortable talking about it with your child. Talk to your GP and a health professional. You can also access information online about the type of difficulties you are having and the supports and treatments available.

Some people find it difficult to broach the topic of Mental Health with their child as they worry it might burden them. On the contrary, many parents report that their child is very accepting and it can be very comforting for the child to understand why things might be 'different'. It can also be very reassuring for your child to see you are taking steps to increase support to help you to manage the illness.

Child perceptions

Children are incredibly perceptive and many can describe the changes that result from their parents' mental health. Children can perceive these changes despite all our efforts to protect them and keep things hidden.

Children have very active imaginations and sometimes they imagine things are much worse than they actually are. They also tend to blame themselves. This is why telling your child about your illness is so important.

How to start

It can help children if you normalise your mental health difficulty. To help you to feel comfortable to talk to your child about this, consider discussing it with your GP or Mental Health professional.

You might tell them, just as you can break a leg or get a physical illness, your mind can also become unwell. Ask them if they have noticed any unusual behaviour and then explain it as part of your difficulty. It is important to reassure your child that they are in no way responsible for what's happening.

Tips to Support Parenting

Just because you have a Mental Health difficulty does not mean you can't be a good parent. Here are some things you can do to help your child.

Explain to your child what is wrong

Your child will notice when something isn't right. It's better if you explain what is wrong. You can initiate this or wait until your child asks. Some children don't want a serious, sit-down conversation and may prefer to chat to you as you do some activity together. Keep your words simple.

Be honest

Explain what you can do about what's going on and ask your child to explain it back to ensure that they understand; sometimes children hear words about Mental Health difficulty that they don't understand. Ask them to explain it using their own words and images.

Listen to your child

Ask your child about their thoughts and worries. Listen carefully to what they say. One discussion is generally not enough as children's questions and opinions change as they grow. Allow a space for these discussions. Avoid keeping Mental Health difficulty a 'secret'.

Observe your child

Children's behaviour usually reflects how they feel. If there is a change in their behaviour this could indicate that something is difficult for them. Some changes are obvious, e.g. bedwetting, skipping school. However some are a little more subtle, e.g. becoming quiet and withdrawn, not sleeping as well as usual. Take opportunities to talk with your child about what might be troubling them. If your child has worries, try to reduce these by making plans, e.g. 'what if...' scenarios.

Keep to the usual routines

In so far as you can, keep to everyday routines as this will increase your child's sense of security and safety. If there are changes to daily routine, talk to your child about them in advance where possible.

Talk about how they can help

Children like to help. Suggest small things, e.g. picking up their toys, drawing a picture for you, that they can do to feel helpful.