



ParentingNI
Supporting Families

Parental Mental Health

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Parents and Mental Health

In recent years, a great deal of work has been done both in Northern Ireland and more globally to combat the stigma associated with mental health issues. We now know that about one in five people will suffer a mental illness serious enough to require treatment throughout their lives (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). The exact causes of various mental illnesses are highly complicated – they are a complex mix of genetics, experiences in life and random chance.

Certain factors can make mental ill health more or less likely, or can increase or decrease the length of illness. One such factor is being a parent. Rates of clinical depression can be as high as 35% in mothers with young children (Smith, 2004). Being a parent is stressful, and when combined with other potential stresses like being a single parent, poverty or physical illness the likelihood of causing a drop in mental wellbeing, such as anxiety or depression is higher.

Being a person with mental ill-health is extremely challenging. There is an enormous stigma associated with being mentally unwell – despite concerted attempts to address it. Research has suggested that people with mental illnesses are among the most devalued of all people with disabilities (Lyons & Hayes, 1995). This is especially true of parents with mental illness. There is a perception that parents with mental illness are unfit or unable to parent their children (Bassett et al, 1999) in society. Such parents feel that the healthcare and social services systems treat them poorly.

Despite this, many people with mental illness have children. One study found that as many as 60% of people with serious, chronic mental illness had a child under the age of 16 (Smith, 2004). For those parents, there are a number of specific challenges, such as (from Bassett et al 1999):

- Their existence as parents was often ignored. Poor link ups between adult mental health and children's services made it hard for treatment to acknowledge their parenthood;
- They feared losing custody of their children;
- If they were hospitalised, they were often traumatised by this;
- They are socially isolated;
- They worried about the care of their child if they became ill;
- They struggled to access help and support;
- They faced stigma.

If you are feeling overwhelmed as a parent, you may also worry about the impacts it will have on your child. It is true that the children of parents with a mental health issue are a risk group for the development of mental illness themselves (Weissman et al. 2009). An element of this is genetic, mental ill health does have an aspect that cannot be controlled by parenting behaviours and in that way is not easily avoidable. However, parents should not worry unduly – Rutter & Quinton (1994) found that a third of children

of parents with chronic mental ill health showed no emotional or behavioural disturbance, and a further third showed only passing problems.

Furthermore, many studies have suggested that it is not depression, anxiousness or other wellbeing issues that cause problems. Instead, it is the disruptions to normal, authoritative parenting styles that can lead to poorer outcomes. This is supported by the findings that the type of parental emotional health problem is not a strong predictor of the type of problems that manifest themselves in children (Smith, 2004). Leinonen et al (2003) suggested that parental mental health problems often led to a decrease in difficulty for parents in monitoring boundaries, keeping consistent discipline and remaining engaged with their children. These factors had a much more serious and trackable impact on their child than the simple diagnosis of a mental health problem.

What should I do about it?

As previously mentioned, it is certainly not uncommon for parents to experience difficulty coping. This may be very mild – a “blue day” – or very severe. It may be chronic, occurring for a long period, or it might be passing. The first action parents should take is to monitor their own mental health. If they find that they are unusually irritable with their child’s actions, or demotivated to spend time or attention with them. ‘Mind’, the mental health charity suggests the following steps for parents to help improve mental health:

- Do some physical activity. If you don’t feel up to something strenuous, try a short walk;
- Think about your diet – eating regularly and healthily can improve your feelings of wellbeing;
- Take some “you” time – even just 10 minutes when you can.

More advice can be found on Mind’s website, [here](#).

Another key mitigating factor that can reduce the negative outcomes of mental ill-health is by having a strong support network. Not every parent will have a support network available, but if you can rely on a partner this can be very useful. Warm and supportive interactions with a partner are associated with sensitive and supportive parenting in the case of a parent with mental illness (Leinonen et al. 2003). If you don’t have a partner, or you cannot rely upon them in this way, consider getting help from friends and family members. It can be difficult to share your concerns with people, but remember that you do not need to provide detailed information to someone. Simply explain what you feel is absolutely necessary – and do not be afraid to ask for help when it is needed.

It can also be good to talk to your child about the difficulty you are having, and what type of extra support you get or might need. This must obviously be done in an age-appropriate manner, but a simple conversation can help to prevent them feeling that their parent “doesn’t care” about them when they have a depressive episode, for example. Some advice from the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance can be used to start a discussion with your child:

- Ask them why they think that mum/dad sometimes acts “different” or “strange”;
- They might feel guilty or embarrassed by the situation. Explain that mental health problems can sometimes cause this, and that they don’t need to worry;
- If they ask a question you cannot answer, like “when will you be better”, be honest, but don’t scare them. If you can, work together to get an answer that satisfies them;
- Encourage them to speak about any feelings they don’t feel comfortable talking to you about with a trusted friend or family member;
- Tell them that you love them, no matter how the mental illness affects you.

More information about talking to children can be found [here](#).

In terms of getting support, it is always better to get help early. While it is never too late to ask for help, the most effective support is given early. Parenting supports should be accessed before negative outcomes are apparent in your child, if they can. These supports will help to reduce the disruptions in the parent-child relationship, give you the tools to respond when your mental wellbeing is lower and to prevent things from getting worse. Do not hesitate to reach out to supports like Parenting NI, who can also help signpost you to resources in your own community. Every parent needs help at some point during their parenting journey, and no one should feel ashamed about accessing it no matter the circumstances.