

## Children of Mentally Ill Parents- What they Need to be Taught

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### Abstract

Mental illness in parents can have a great impact on the lives of the children, affecting them in every sphere of their lives. Families shape the quality of lives. Early relationships within the family serve as a prototype for later relationships. When parental mental illness is present, children may have unsatisfactory models for later peer relationships. They face problems in relationships-both family and peer, academics, and also go through psychological and behavioural problems. The environment in which they grow often tends to be chaotic and many children are forced to assume the role of carers. Care-giving has been associated with limiting young people's recreation, friendships, educational achievement and personal growth. It is very important for every health care professional to realize this painful situation that a child goes through in dealing with a mentally ill parent. They should spend some time in talking to these children, teach them some adaptive coping strategies that will help them cope effectively with the situation that they are going through. Some of the strategies discussed below include accepting reality, understanding their parents' condition, improving family and peer relationships, seeking social support, working on academic performance, dealing with psychological and behavioural issues and so on.

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### Introduction

Many children grow up with a parent who has a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder or depression. The mental illness of a family member is an unexpected event that disrupts the usual sense of continuity with a deep impact on every family member, but it affects children and adolescents the most. They may face problems in studies and relationship formation with friends or others. They can also develop psychological and behavioural problems such as anger, loneliness, being withdrawn and at times becoming violent. Most of them feel embarrassed to talk about their feelings or discuss about their parents' illness.

According to Falkov [1] the environment in which the children grow up often tends to be chaotic and threatening, particularly if the child is included in the parental delusional behaviour, while depressed parents might be physically but not emotionally available to their children. Parental mental illness places children at a significantly greater risk of having lower social, psychological, and physical health than children in families not affected by mental illness. Fudge & Mason, [2] point out that some children of parents with a mental illness, particularly those in sole parent families take on the role of carer to the parent. While children's experiences of caring responsibilities can be both positive and negative, a survey found child carers to be less happy than other pupils at school, more depressed, with lower self-esteem and more likely to leave home earlier. Children often take significant practical and emotional responsibility for their parent as well as other family members, such as younger siblings. Of significant concern is the fact that children of parents with mental

health problems are at increased risk of developing mental health difficulties themselves. This has been attributed to one or more factors – genetic predisposition, the impact of parenting style and ability, and learnt behaviour. Aldridge, and Becker, [3] further reported that assuming domestic and emotional responsibilities for their mentally ill parent and/or younger siblings, particularly in single parent families was another issue faced by the children of mentally ill parents. Care-giving has been associated with limiting young people's recreation, friendships, educational achievement and personal growth. The children may also experience difficulty in school as a result of their preoccupation with problems at home and may feel alienated from the "normal world" of their peers. All the energy would be directed at what was happening at home and what would become of the family. They may also worry about developing mental illness themselves.

Marsh believes that families shape the quality of lives. Early relationships within the family serve as a prototype for later relationships. When parental mental illness is present, children may have unsatisfactory models for later peer relationships. Along with their limited interpersonal skills, young offspring may feel tainted by the noxious effects of stigma and uncomfortable with friends who have a little understanding of mental illness.

#### *Teaching adaptive strategies*

Whilst healthcare professionals spend a great deal of time counselling the adult family members and their relatives on managing the mentally ill patient, sadly very little time is generally spent in talking to the children and understanding their problems. A little extra effort if taken by the healthcare professionals can contribute a lot in preventing the problems that the children face as a result of their parent's mental illness. The following strategies can be taught to the children to deal effectively with the problems they face as a result of their parents' mental illness:

#### *1. Accepting the situation*

The most important step is accepting the reality. Accept the fact that sometimes people's minds get confused and mixed up. This may make the parent not feel well-they may cry, be angry or irritable. They should remember that it is not the parent as the person but the illness within him/her that is making them behave in such a way. [5]

#### *2. Learning about their parents condition*

Most of the children are aware that their parent suffers from some sort of mental illness, but do not know exactly what is that condition. That's the reason why they find it difficult to understand why their parent behaves in a particular way at times [4]. They can try the following strategies:

- Ask the other parent/family members about the illness of their parent.
- They can ask the treating psychiatrist to explain about their parents' illness. This will help them understand their sick parent better and in a more effective way.
- Read publications by professionals or by family members themselves
- Learn about the experiences of the rest of the family, their concerns and needs.

#### *3. Improving family relationship.*

- Most often the family members may not want to share their problems with their child for fear of upsetting them or hurting them. The child should make them realize that it is their silence that upsets him/her the most.
- The children should share their feelings with their family members and make them aware of their problems and fears.
- Take initiative to have family discussions at home, in case that does not happen. Discuss the parents' mental illness and what needs to be done. [4,5]
- Share the responsibilities in the family, so that one person is not burdened.
- Seek out to others who have shared the family experience of mental illness. They can validate your experience, share your anguish and offer practical advice.

#### *4. Working on peer relationship*

Most children feel embarrassed talking about their parents for fear of being teased or feel that their friends have deserted them [4,6,7]. They can follow the steps given below.

- First of all analyse the situation on your own. Have they actually deserted you or have you consciously or unconsciously distanced yourself from your friends for fear of being deserted.
- Talk to your friends about your parents' illness and the reason why he/she behaves in a particular way.

- It is okay and natural to feel embarrassed about your parents' illness, but that should not stop you from explaining it to your friends.
- Practice how to respond to hurtful comments. Make them understand that your parent is not acting this way on purpose.
- If the above strategy does not work, try ignoring the comments passed on to you by others. They are unable to understand the situation and that's why they are doing it.
- Keep in touch with your friends and try to spend adequate time with them. They may also be able to help you out in dealing with your problems.
- If your old friends have deserted you, try forming new friends, those who can understand your situation and feelings. But resist the temptation of falling in bad company.
- Look out for possibilities of staying back after school so that you finish your studies and go home
- Seek your teachers help for the subjects you are unable to cope with.
- Take your teacher into confidence and inform her ahead of your absence in case you need to take your parent to the hospital
- Make it a point to enquire about the lessons covered, assignments/homework given and take down the notes from classmates or request your teachers to help. Make this a regular habit and do this each time you are absent from school/college.
- Do not be discouraged if your scores do not reach upto your level of expectations. Continue to work hard. You will reap the benefits.
- Do not despair if you are unable to continue your regular studies. You can continue your schooling through the National Open School and join a correspondence course for your collegiate program.

#### 5. Seeking social support

- The children with mentally ill parents should realize that they are not expected to shoulder the entire responsibility of their family on their own. They should seek the help of people around them. (6)
- They can try explaining the condition of their parent to the neighbours and relatives and request their cooperation especially when the parent is admitted or in the acute phase.
- In situations where they are unable to get help of neighbours and relatives, they can explore the community resources in their area.

#### 6. Improving academic performance

Children may find their academic performance dipping especially when the environment at home has suddenly changed. They may have difficulty concentrating in studies or be unable to their assignments as they may have to take care of their ill-parent or have chores to do at home [6]. There may also be situations where they have to be frequently absent from school. They can try the following strategies:

- If the atmosphere at home is not conducive for studies try studying with classmates who live close by or go to your neighbour's house if they are co-operative enough.
- Chalk a time table that will include the hours for study and carrying out the household chores.
- You may have to wake up a little early in order to do your daily studies.

#### 7. Preventing psychological and behavioural issues.

Living with a mentally ill parent can be a difficult task and an unpredictable one. Some days they may seem perfectly alright and some days everything may just go haywire. This may cause the children to feel frustrated, angry or sad [6, 7]. They should know that it is normal to experience all of these feelings. Here's what they can do [7]:

- Participate in some physical activity which will release the anger. This may include exercising, playing, running, playing some sport or taking a brisk walk. This will not only bring them out of the anger provoking situation but also relax the mind.
- It is also OK to cry when feeling really sad or frustrated. Crying helps release the pent up feelings.
- Spend time with friends.
- Practise deep breathing exercises, yoga or meditation.
- Involve self in creative pursuits of such as painting, drawing, watching T.V., listening to music etc.
- Take time to unwind in pleasurable activities.
- Practice good self-care. Develop healthy habits for daily living that meet the needs for sleep, nutrition, exercise and relaxation.
- Learn to socialize. One doesn't have to stop enjoying life.

- Abstain from any destructive behaviour such as promiscuity, alcohol, drug abuse or smoking.
- Adopt a responsible behaviour by obeying parents and teachers, being regular to school and avoiding picking up fights with others. By adopting a responsible behaviour the child is doing his/her bit in helping the family members.

#### 8. Dealing with financial issues

Some children may experience financial problems as a result of their parents' mental illness. Some may even have had to drop out of school and take up a part-time job.

- Seek the assistance of the social services/NGOs available in the community.
- As stated earlier, studies can be continued through the National Open School and other universities offering correspondence education.
- The children can join some vocational courses teaching income-generating skills that will allow to earn a living or at least add to the family income.

#### Some additional strategies that may help the children

- Ensure that the sick parent takes regular treatment and goes for follow up. Stopping the treatment in between will only cause more distress.
- At times of acute exacerbation of parents' illness, the children should seek the help of the psychiatrist in learning how to manage the situation. At such moments take each day as it comes.[6]
- They can even discuss their problems with the psychiatrist treating their parent.
- Maintain a positive attitude.

The above simple coping strategies if taught to the children can help them deal effectively with some of the problems that they may face as a result of their parent's mental illness

#### Conclusion

Parental mental illness is a multifaceted problem for many families, often resulting in unique difficulties

for the parents, children and the entire family. The complex needs and experiences of children and adolescents of parents with a mental illness have often been overlooked. There is a definite need for providing guidance and counselling to the children to protect them from the distressing experience of parental mental illness. Teaching them adaptive coping strategies will enable these children to meet with courage that daily challenges that they may be exposed to.

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