

Supporting Children When a Parent is Struggling with Mental Health

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When a parent is struggling with mental health, such as depression or bipolar disorder, it's important to communicate honestly and provide children with age-appropriate information. This helps them process their emotions and develop coping strategies. Here are tips on how to support your child:

- **Be Honest, but Age-Appropriate** – Use simple, clear language that suits your child's age to explain your mental illness. Avoid overwhelming them with complex details but provide enough for them to understand. Reading storybooks together can be helpful. (Search online for recommendations and read through the book prior to reading it to your child to ensure it is appropriate.)
- **Reassure Your Child** – Let them know that your illness is not their fault and that they are not responsible for your well-being. Provide reassurance that you are working on getting the help you need.
- **Encourage Questions** – Allow your child to ask questions about your mental health. Answer honestly and calmly, validating their curiosity and concerns.
- **Normalize Mental Health** – Explain that mental health struggles are common, and just like physical illnesses, people sometimes need treatment to feel better.
- **Model Healthy Coping** – Show your child how you take care of yourself. This could be through therapy, medication, or self-care activities. Let them see that you are actively working to manage your illness.
- **Create a Support Plan**– Let your child know who they can turn to for support (another family member, a counselor) if they need to talk, or if they are worried about you.
- **Acknowledge Your Child's Emotions** – Validate any feelings your child may express, such as confusion, sadness, or even anger. Let them know it's okay to feel this way.
- **If you notice that you are feeling irritable or sleeping a lot due to your mental illness, it's important to explain to your child in simple terms that this is part of your illness and not their fault. Reassure them that you are getting the help you need and that you still love and care for them, even when you may not seem as present.**
- **If You Are Being Hospitalized** – Explain in age-appropriate language why you're being hospitalized, such as, "I need to go to the hospital to get special help from the doctors. The hospital is a safe place where I will get the care that I need. I don't know exactly how long I will be in the hospital, but once I know the plan, I will let you know." Reassure your child that others will help care for them, for example, "While I'm in the hospital, Aunt Martha will help take care of you." Normalize and validate their feelings about your hospitalization, for example, "I know it's very upsetting for you to be apart from me, and whatever you're feeling is normal and okay."
- **Seek Family Counseling** – Consider involving your child in family therapy, where they can learn more about your illness and process their feelings with a professional.

For more information or support, contact Liana Lowenstein:

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