

## Understanding and Supporting Children Living with Parental Mental Illness: Eight Key Lessons for Therapists

Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D.

*“Sometimes I [June, 9 years old] would come home and she [my mom] would say, “Who are you? Get out of my house,” and she’d threaten to call the cops. She had no idea who I was. I was always afraid that she was going to call the police, and they would come and see that she’s insane, and they would take me away from my sister.” (Nathiel, 2007, p. 42)*

*“And at home she [Mary Wells, a mother of two girls] went to pieces. She scarcely got up to make the girls breakfast or to see them off to school in the morning, and she was often still lying in bed in the back room, drinking gin and smoking, when they came home in the afternoon. They would come to her room and stand in the doorway and look at her. Sometimes they would lie down on the bed beside her and go to sleep in that place that used to be so pleasant and comfortable. More often now the two sisters would fight with each other when they were home and she would call them to stop, but other times she would simply get up and shut the door and light a cigarette and lie down again.” (Haruf, 2004, p. 226)*

Over five million children in the United States have a parent with a serious mental illness. Although each child’s experience is unique, living with a parent with a mental illness can be embarrassing, confusing, lonely, and scary. Youth growing up with parents dealing with emotional problems are at greater risk of emotional problems themselves due to both genetic factors and harmful psychosocial experiences.

Sadly, these children have received little attention. British child and adolescent psychiatrist, Alan Cooklin, MD, described the situation as follows: “Children with a parent with mental illness often fall through the cracks and are seen as nobody’s responsibility. Nothing is explained to them, and they often receive no help at all...These children need to be seen and heard” (Cooklin, 2007). Mental health providers—both those specializing in treating adults and youth—have a tremendous opportunity to SEE and HEAR these children.

### What Do These Youth Need?

Children of parents with mental illness need information, support, and hope. Therapists can see, hear, and support these young people in many important ways. Here are eight concrete things that these youth need:

- 1. Reassurance that they’re not alone.**  
All children need to be reminded that they are not alone! Therapists can create support groups in schools and community settings to encourage these young people to connect with others who have similar experiences.
- 2. Honest acknowledgement of the parent’s difficulties and information about the illness**

Help families talk openly about struggles they face instead of perpetuating the secrecy and shame that often surround mental illness. People (children especially) fear what they do not understand. Children need to know: What is going on? Why is this happening to me? How can I make my parent better? Will I be like my parent some day?

**3. To be told that they are not to blame.**

It's reassuring for children to be told that they didn't do anything wrong! Sending this message clearly and consistently can relieve considerable guilt and shame among children.

**4. To know that the parent loves them.**

Reminding young people that their parent cares about them can be comforting. Sometimes parents behave in rejecting ways that can be confusing and hurtful to the child—or parents are so consumed with their own problems that they're unavailable for their children. Encouraging youth to consider that their parents are probably "doing the best they can" under the circumstances can be useful.

**5. To be able to be kids.**

Due to the family's preoccupation with the parent, some youth are given excessive responsibilities such as childcare for younger siblings, household chores, and even managing the parent's behavior and medications. It's important for children to be able to get away from the heavy burdens from home and just have fun.

**6. Safe people to talk to.**

All youth need support from healthy adults and teens in their extended family, community, school, and church. Mental health professionals can be powerful sources of support; we can also connect children with others in their families/communities who can provide assistance long after we're out of the picture.

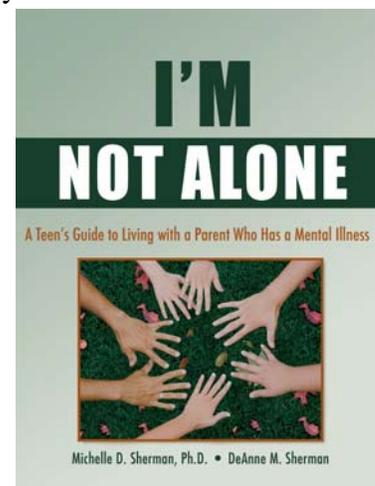
**7. Empowerment.**

Children want to be helpful. Although we want to discourage children from believing they can "fix" their parent, we can brainstorm with the children about small, specific ways in which they can support their parent...such as playing cards together, sending a kind email, or cleaning his/her room without being asked!

**8. Hope.**

Remind children that things probably won't always feel this tough, and that many effective treatments are available for their parent. Recovery from serious mental illness is possible!

In my personal life, I've written a book for these children (along with my mother, a teacher) titled:



## **"I'm Not Alone: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has a Mental Illness"**

It examines the youth's experience of having a parent who has depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. The mission of our book is to empower youth by:

- \* Providing essential information
- \* Normalizing a variety of reactions
- \* Encouraging open communication
- \* Supporting healthy coping
- \* Offering comfort and hope

The book is highly interactive, containing numerous activities, open-ended sentences, short stories depicting healthy coping, and opportunities for reflection. Sample pages and more information are available at our website:

[www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com](http://www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com)

Although there certainly are some great books for children, the literature is relatively barren for teenagers. Thus, our work fills a gap in available resources, and can serve as a tool for providers to open dialogue about these children's experiences.

### **Also available:**

#### ***Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma***

Examines the teenager's experience of having a parent who has endured trauma-ranging from military combat to domestic violence to 9/11 to natural disasters.

#### ***My Story: Blogs by Four Military Teens***

A series of blogs which gives a voice to the teen experience before, during and after parental deployment to Iraq/Afghanistan

*Michelle Sherman, Ph.D. has committed her career to supporting families/youth affected by mental illness and trauma/PTSD. She directs the Family Mental Health Program at the Oklahoma City VA hospital, and is a clinical professor at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. She co-chaired the first American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Supporting our Military Families.*