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A HANDBOOK FOR OLDER CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WHOSE MOTHER OR FATHER HAS MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

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FOREWORD



If one or both parents are having issues with their mental health, a lot of things may change at home. Maybe the parents can't cope with everyday things like they used to. They may be uptight or irritable, so they get angry easily and say hurtful things. Or maybe they're really tired and quiet. They might behave strangely and say weird things. Maybe they argue a lot. It's no wonder that children sometimes get puzzled and don't really know what's going on or what to do.

This handbook explains what mental health problems are and tries to answer some of the questions you might have. If there's something in it you find hard to understand, ask your parents for help. The book is written for older children, so if you're younger than 12, read it together with your mum or dad.

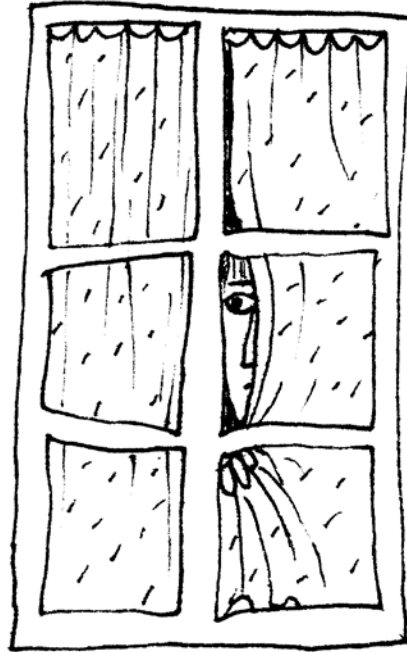
For the sake of simplicity, the guide talks about children, but it is also intended to include adolescents. No matter what age we are, we are always children to our parents.

WHAT ARE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?



We've all been ill at some point. When you're ill, some part of your body doesn't work well. When your throat is sore, it's hard to swallow. If you try to eat when you have a stomach-ache, you throw up. When the mind gets ill, it gets confused and can't function properly.

When the mind works well, we think, feel and behave OK. When the mind isn't working well, there can be disruptions in our feelings, thoughts and behaviour.

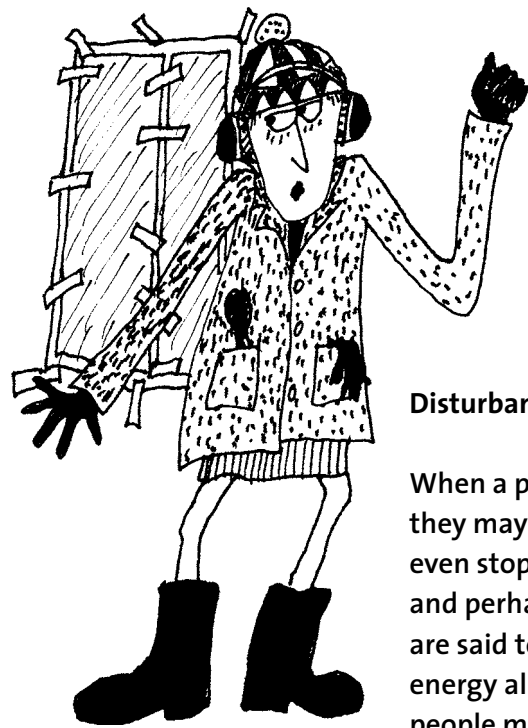


Emotional disturbances

When a person's emotional life gets disturbed, one emotion may become stronger than the others and overwhelm the mind. The person might feel extremely scared and timid, depressed and miserable, or irritable and angry. An anxious person experiences even small things as frightening, while a depressed person only sees the negative sides of things. An irritable person finds reasons to get angry just about everywhere they look.



In medicine, illnesses are given different names. Problems with feelings are called emotional disorders, and different emotional disorders are named according to the predominant feeling. This is how fear and anxiety disorders and depression got their names. Panic disorder is another. People who suffer from panic disorder get a sudden surge of anxiety, fear and distress so powerful they're afraid they won't be able to cope with it.



Disturbances in functioning

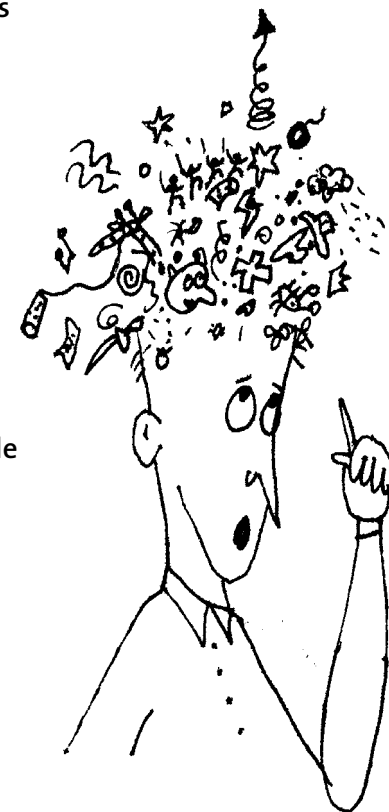
When a person's normal functioning is disturbed, they may become very slow and numbed. They may even stop talking. Or they may be full of activity and perhaps talk all the time. In medicine, people are said to be manic when they have loads of energy all the time. Eating may also be disturbed: people may eat too much sometimes or stop eating nearly altogether. Then they are said to suffer from an eating disorder.

Sometimes it might be that one kind of functioning takes over completely. In this case, the person feels like they have to repeat one particular task, such as washing their hands or checking the lights all the time or touching door jams. Other people can't see any sense in these behaviours. However, the disturbed thinking makes the person think that something bad will happen if they do not touch the door jams. This is scary and exhausting, as the person is often unable to stop, even if they want to. These problems are called obsessive-compulsive disorders.

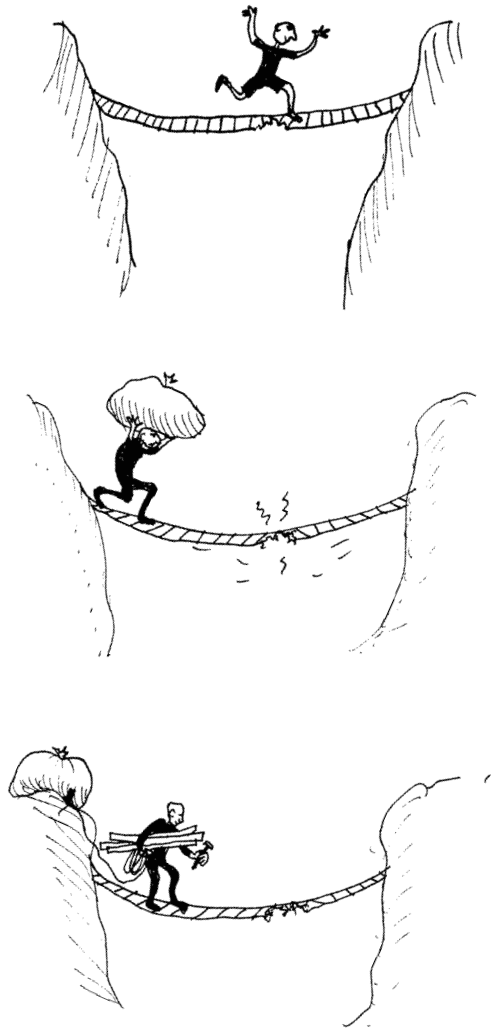
Disturbances in thinking

When thinking is disturbed, the mind can produce the strangest thoughts and experiences, and the person will still believe them. For example, someone may think that their thoughts are being influenced from outer space, or that the neighbours are sending out beams or rays that affect them. They may see or hear things or talk to beings that aren't really there. Such experiences are called hallucinations.

People may also have a distorted understanding of everyday things. Maybe they think a shoe on the floor is a sign being given to them, an omen predicting a future accident. Distorted thinking can also make people feel that they're under threat and believe that they're being followed in the street, or watched from a window. These kinds of problems are called psychotic disorders. Disturbed thinking is often frightening for the person experiencing it as well as their family, especially if they aren't aware that this is a form of illness.



WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?



We don't know everything about the causes of mental health problems, and we can't say why certain people have them. There is seldom a single reason for them — usually there are many. Difficult life situations or the loss of a loved one are some common reasons, as well as scary life events. People can also wear themselves out working too hard. They exhaust their energy, and the mind is no longer able to work well.

Difficult experiences earlier in life can also have an impact. It's as if they left a scar on the mind, a weak point. Later on, if things get difficult again, this weak point may give way.

It's also known that the risk for mental health disorders is greater if many people in the family suffer from them. This is a bit like the scar, the weak point that might give way. However, it's good to know about your weak points. Then you can seek help in time and issues don't grow too overwhelming.



Will I end up with the same illness?

The children of parents with mental health problems often wonder if they might end up with the same kinds of problems when they grow up. Mental health problems are so common that anyone can suffer from them at some point during their life. However, your parent's problems don't mean that you'll get the same illness. Experiences in other families show that most children cope well. Your mum's or dad's illness is the result of many things and events in their life. Has your life been exactly the same as your parents'? Of course not. So you're coming from a totally different starting point.

Maybe I'm already getting ill?

Many children examine themselves and notice they have the same kinds of feelings that their mum or dad has. This is because everyone sometimes gets depressed, anxious or can't sleep, and things go badly. That's life. We speak about something being an illness or disorder only when the problems take away from other activities and it becomes hard for everyday life to go on normally.





What if the parents have told you not to talk about the problems at home? This is common, as some parents are afraid of what people will think about them having mental health problems. Nonetheless, everyone, children and adults alike, are allowed to talk about anything bothering them to healthcare workers and get help. Your parents may later understand how important it was to you.

However, life at home might be so hard for you that you get tired. Being worried about your mum or dad or even the whole family can make it difficult for you to sleep. Maybe you can't concentrate on school or other things. Maybe you're not doing as well at school as before. Do you feel unhappy, worried and scared most of the time? Are you eating enough, or have you lost weight? Are you happy and active, or do you find life joyless and boring? If you feel the latter, you may be exhausted and under too much pressure, and might need help.

Talk to your parents. See a doctor or nurse at school, or go to the health centre. Tell them about things at home and about any worries you have. There may be a family counselling clinic or youth clinic in your area; you can also contact them. Show them this booklet and say that this is about you.



HOW ARE MENTAL DISORDERS TREATED?



Just like other illnesses, mental health problems can be treated. Treatment is given at health centres and mental health clinics. Hospital treatment is sometimes needed. In day treatment clinics, people come to the hospital in the morning and return home in the evening.

Ask your mum or dad what kind of treatment they're getting if you don't already know. Maybe they'll tell you they go to the centre to talk about things. During treatment, professionals discuss your mum's or dad's life situation with them, and they might consider how life could run more smoothly. Psychotherapy is a form of treatment based on talking things through and making changes. During this kind of treatment, your mum or dad will see a therapist regularly. Therapy may also take place in groups where people suffering from the same kinds of problems seek solutions together.

What about medication?

There are many kinds of medications for mental health problems. Some of them help control the feeling that has taken over or get rid of a compulsive behaviour. Others help people sleep better. Some help balance the mind so that it stops producing strange thoughts and help the person tell the difference between what's real and what's not.

Sometimes people are scared of medication. This is usually the result of ignorance. If there's a medication for an illness, taking it is advisable. Nobody tries to claim that heart diseases or diabetes, for example, shouldn't be treated with medication.



Sometimes parents don't take their medication properly. Maybe this has happened in your family as well. Have you started to take care of your parent's medication? This is quite a task and might certainly cause you a lot of worry.

If you're in this situation, tell your mum or dad that checking their medication is an impossible task for you and causes you a lot of worry. Maybe they haven't thought about it from your point of view. It's also possible that your mum or dad won't listen to you. In this case, talk to your other parent or somebody outside the family. It's asking too much of a child of any age to take responsibility for a parent's medication.





When can a person be hospitalised against their will?

When a person's thinking is thoroughly distorted, they're often said to be out of touch with reality. In medicine, such people are said to be psychotic or suffering from schizophrenia. At times it is necessary to take people to the hospital even if they do not want to go. Sometimes the risk of people hurting themselves is so high that they have to be taken to the hospital against their will in an ambulance or by the police. It is always hard for children if a parent is hospitalised this way, especially if the children don't really know what's going on.

It's easier to understand if you think about a nightmare where you're being chased. Imagine you really believe it's true but other people know it's not. You start talking about and doing things that other people find strange. You're scared and you might try to escape, whatever the cost. And then comes a doctor who says that you need treatment! You feel offended and angry because others aren't taking the danger threatening you seriously. You might also think that the doctor is collaborating with those who are chasing you. You might desperately fight against those who want to take you to treatment. But later, when you realize that you believed a dream, you're grateful that you were prevented from doing more foolish things.





CAN MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS BE TREATED?



Most people recover from mental health problems. It often takes more time than with physical illnesses, though, and there can also be ups and downs during the recovery: sometimes steady improvement, sometimes setbacks. Setbacks are often hard to take because there's the temptation to believe that the person will have to start all over again. But often a setback is just a normal part of the recovery.

One can compare the process of recovering from a mental health disorder with that of recovering from a back problem. At first the back is really painful and the patient has trouble moving about. Then the pain subsides and it gets easier to move. But then, one day, the pain is back and the back is stiff again. Eventually the back is OK, but the patient has to exercise and make sure that the back stays in good shape. In a similar way, your mum or dad might have to go to therapy for a long time and maybe make some changes in their life, for instance not work so much.



There are also mental health problems that last a long time, sometimes even the rest of a person's life. There are disorders that get better but then reappear much later. It's important that both the person who is ill and the family members know what the disorder is about. This helps the family to cope when the parent is ill.



Can I do something to help mum or dad?

Yes, you can. Maybe the most important thing is to tell your mum or dad that they are important to you in spite of the problems. You can do kind things and be affectionate and considerate. You can make a cup of coffee, pick some flowers or encourage your mum or dad to call a friend.

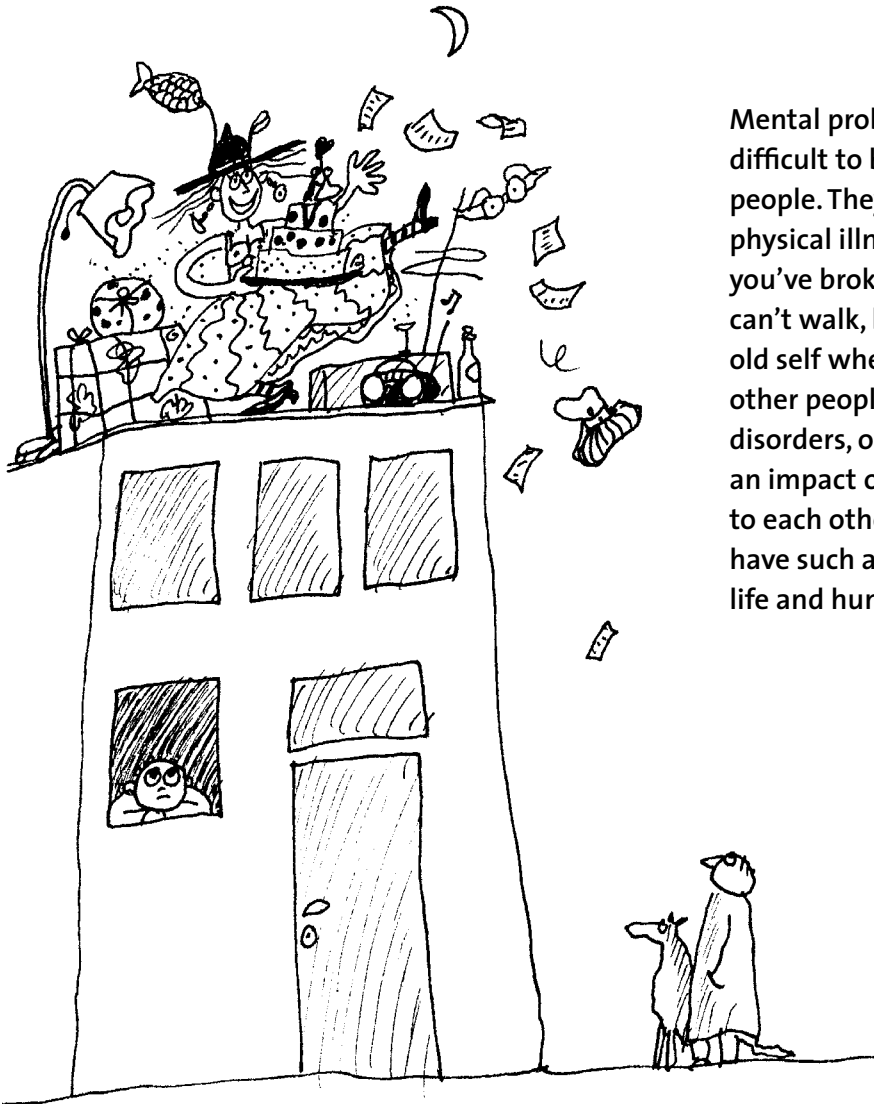
You've probably noticed that sometimes your mum or dad is very pleased when you try to support and comfort them, but other times your attempts are ignored and they don't want the cup of coffee you made or the flowers you picked. This may hurt your feelings and alarm you at the same time: Doesn't anything do any good? Remember that because of the illness, your mum or dad may sometimes seem distant, and nothing can make them happy.

Put the flowers in a vase and go ahead and do your own thing. You tried your best, and maybe your mum or dad will notice the flowers later. If you feel bad and need comforting, tell your other parent or some other adult what happened. You can also tell your mum or dad later that you wanted to bring them joy.



Sometimes children think that if they're helpful enough, the parent will feel better and might even become the same as before. But a child can't solve the parent's problems, no matter what they do. The parent needs treatment. You can, however, tell your mum or dad in many different ways that you care. That's important, and you don't need to do anything else.

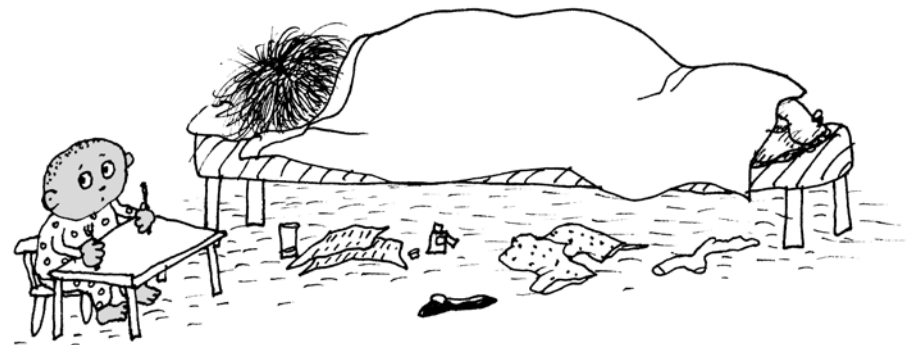
EFFECTS ON FAMILY AND FRIENDS

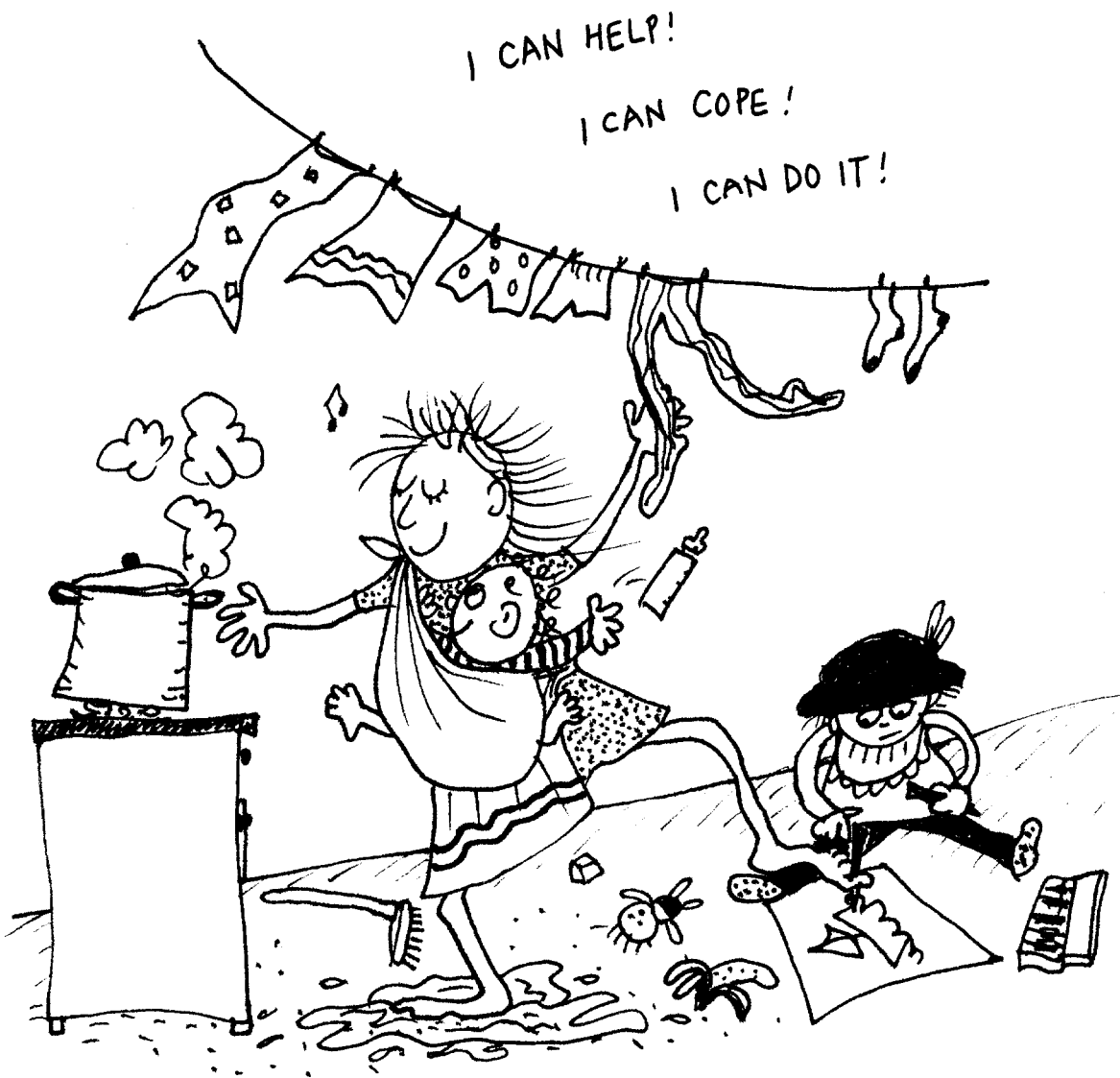


Mental problems make it difficult to be with other people. They differ from most physical illnesses this way. If you've broken your leg, you can't walk, but you're still your old self when you deal with other people. Mental health disorders, on the contrary, have an impact on how people react to each other. That is why they have such a strong impact on life and human relationships.

How are the household chores taken care of?

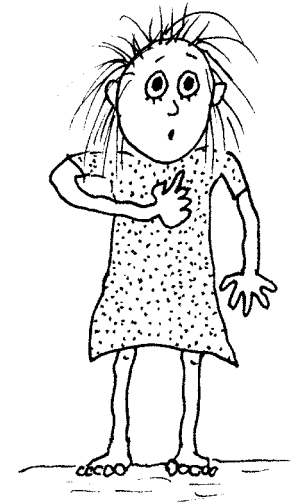
Maybe your parents have such little energy that the dishes are piling up, the laundry is overflowing from the laundry basket and dustballs are gathering in the corners. Maybe your parents don't even do the cooking. Maybe you, or your brother or sister, have taken on these chores.





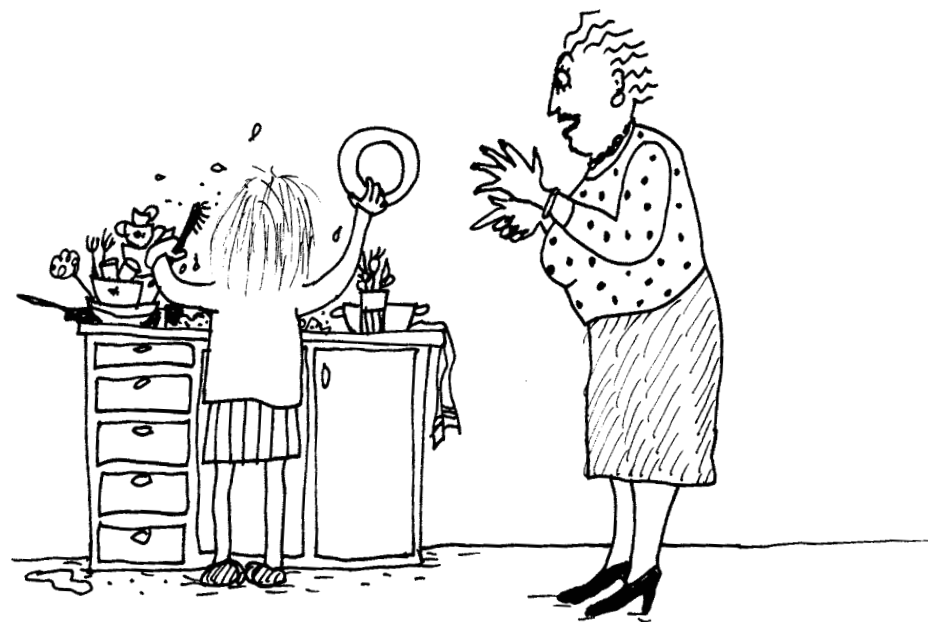
It's good to participate in household chores and do your own bit. But sometimes the household chores and taking care of little sisters and brothers become the responsibility of one child, who isn't able to attend to their own activities and friends anymore. Has this happened in your family? This is too hard for children, be they of whatever age.

So what should you do if your parent is too tired to do the chores but somebody has to cook and do the laundry and clean? Talk about it at home and suggest that you figure out together how the chores can be done without their falling on your shoulders, or your sister's or brother's. It may be possible to get home assistance from the local social office, or ask relatives for help. Sometimes the family may hire home assistance. If it's hard for you to talk about it, show this page to your parents and say that this concerns your family.



What about my hobbies? And friends?

Life at home may be so hard that children stop seeing their friends and having fun. Maybe you don't want to bring friends over because your mum or dad isn't feeling well. Or having fun may seem unfair, like you're letting mum and dad down somehow, because everything is so difficult and sad at home. You might be afraid of leaving your mum or dad at home alone. Or maybe there's nobody to take you to your hobbies and activities.



Friends, hobbies and activities are like food and rest for young people, necessary and important. Is there a neighbour or a parent of a friend of yours who could take you to your activities? If you're afraid of leaving your mum or dad alone, or if you feel that having fun is not fair to them, you need to talk about it together. It's possible that you have misunderstood them. Many parents are worried when they see their children leave off their hobbies and activities.

Can you explain to your friends what's going on with your parent and why you can't always invite them over? It makes things simpler and visits easier. At first, telling them may seem difficult, but your friends are probably more understanding than you think.





Is there a threat of violence in the home?

Some mental health problems make people so temperamental that they can't control themselves when they're angry. A parent might become threatening or violent and end up physically hurting the other parent or you or your brothers or sisters: This is physical violence.

Sometimes a parent starts to mistreat one family member. The parent may constantly scold one of the children, say hurtful things or even be cruel to them. Everything the child does is wrong; they are always in the wrong place and are guilty of everything. They are punished all the time; for instance, by not being allowed to join in when everyone else is doing something fun. This is psychological violence.



Both physical and psychological violence are always harmful to children and adults. Violence is always wrong. If you notice that something like this is happening in your family, immediately talk to your teacher, school health nurse or a health care worker, or visit the local social office. The situation needs to change as soon as possible. You and your sisters and brothers need to be able to feel safe, both psychologically and physically. The parent who is ill also needs help.

Maybe your mum or dad has told you not to tell others about things at home, but this is one of the situations when you must go against what your parent tells you. Although your mum or dad may not understand it just now, it's also better for them that the situation is dealt with and they are prevented from harming other family members.



MISUNDERSTANDINGS

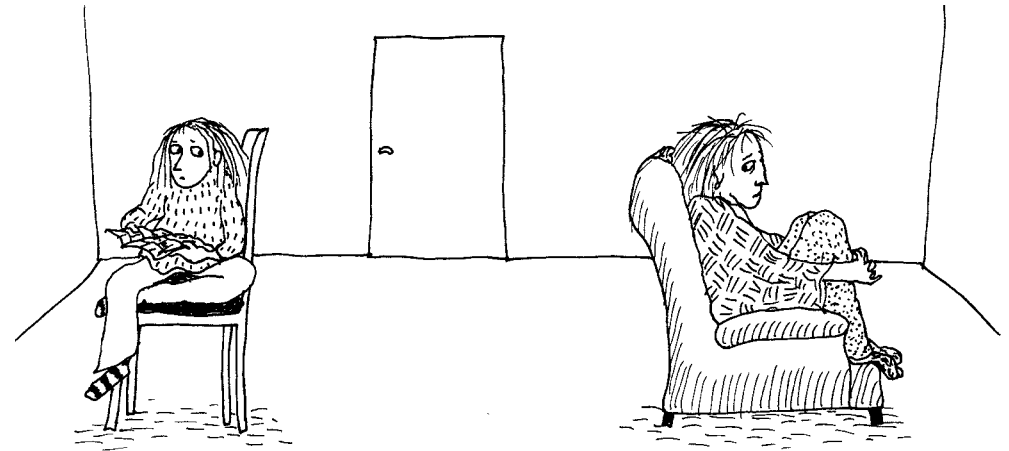
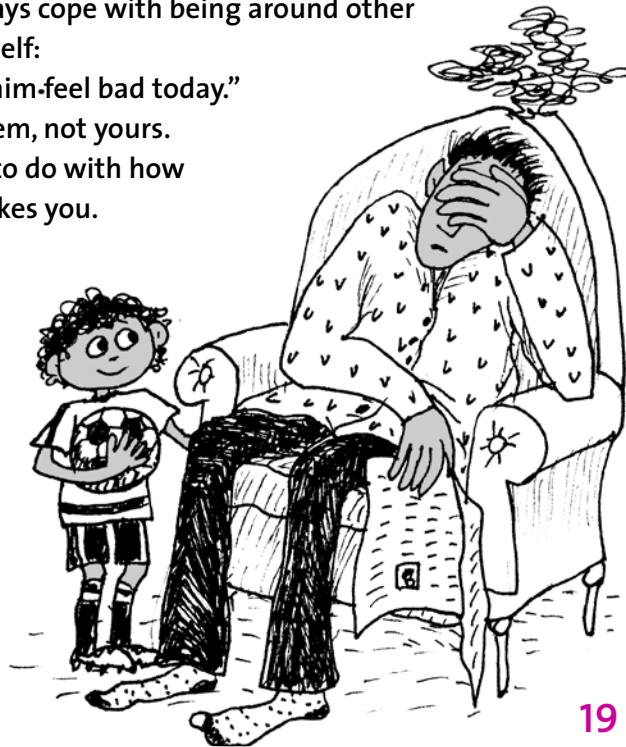
Doesn't dad care about me any more? Doesn't mum love me?

Mental health problems cause a lot of misunderstandings. Misunderstandings are often caused by minor, everyday things. Imagine that you come home one day and when you walked in and said "Hello!" nobody answered. Then you see dad walk into his room and close the door behind him. This feels bad: "Didn't dad like it when I came home? Dad doesn't like me any more." But if you know that he's suffering from depression and that depressed people can't always cope with being around other people, you can say to yourself:

"The depression is making him feel bad today."

It is clearly your dad's problem, not yours.

His behaviour had nothing to do with how you were or how much he likes you.



One kind of misunderstanding is that a child and a parent both believe that the other one doesn't care. In these cases, the child might withdraw to their own room to stay out of the parent's sight. The parent might think that it's not possible for a child to love them the way they are. The parent might withdraw, too. So there they are, the child and the parent sitting in their own corners imagining untrue things about each other. The only way to solve this is to talk about it.

Are my mum's or dad's problems my fault?

Almost all children think that they've caused their parent's problems in one way or another. Do you think so too? You may have given your mum or dad trouble and disappointed them so that they've lost their temper, or started to cry and gone to their own room. Mum or dad may even have blamed you for their unhappiness. If this is the case, it would be no wonder if you blamed yourself.



It may be true that you did something that upset your parent, but such things happen in every family. It's part of everyday life, and it isn't the cause of mental health problems. Your mum or dad may have felt bad as a result of their illness, not because of something you did. If they blame you, it's possible that they don't understand how the illness is affecting them.

Understanding the parent's problems and how they affect their behaviour helps to solve misunderstandings. If something is troubling you, ask your parents. Your parents might not notice these things, or might not understand what they mean to you.



THINGS CHILDREN FEEL

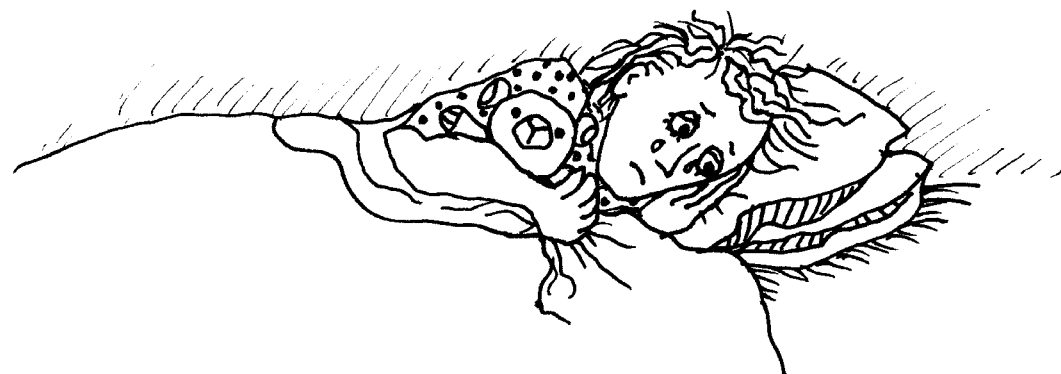
I FEEL BAD
FOR MUM...



Mental health disorders cause a lot of suffering. A depressed parent might describe the way they feel by saying that it feels like being in a dark hole or that they have an empty feeling. One parent might say they've caught the sleeping bug, someone else might call it the crying bug. Anxiety feels like having no safe place anywhere. Distorted thinking is frightening, because the parent doesn't know what's real and what isn't and what will happen next.

Children feel bad when they see that their mum or dad is unhappy. Tell your parents how you feel and that you're worried about them. Children are often afraid that telling about their feelings will just increase their parent's burden, but it's often the other way around. Remember: if you share your joy it will be doubled, and if you share your sorrow it will be halved.

IT'S AWFUL TO SEE
MUM FEELING SO BAD... IT FEELS
LIKE MY HEART'S ♡ SQUEEZING UP INTO
A TINY BALL 🌸
SOMETIMES I JUST WANT TO BE NEXT TO HER
ALL THE TIME. OTHER TIMES I STAY AWAY
AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE... THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO
ANYWAY...
BUT AT NIGHT, I CRY IN MY BED...





The situation at home can be scary in many ways. You don't know for certain what's wrong with mum or dad and whether they'll get well. There may be tension between your parents, and you're afraid of they'll get divorced. If your mum or dad isn't well enough to work, it can be difficult to make ends meet.

The biggest fear is often that mum or dad will hurt themselves. Many children fear this, especially if a parent suffers from depression. Sometimes the situation seems so threatening that the child won't go to school because they don't want to leave the parent alone. During tough periods, a child may get up at night to make sure that mum or dad is sleeping peacefully.



If you have worries like this, tell your parents. The discussion might prove your fears unfounded. It may also be that even though the parent has occasional thoughts of harming themselves, they don't intend on doing it. They can also tell you that they have the means to prevent any harm from happening, for instance by getting in contact with the people who treat them.

If mum or dad tells you that they have thought about or planned suicide but don't want to go anywhere for help, the situation is serious. Your mum or dad apparently isn't able to help themselves. This is when you need help: talk to your other parent or some other adult. In an emergency, call **112** and tell them what the problem is. The parent may tell you not to call, but now you need to trust your own judgement. Do not be afraid of calling without a proper reason. The person who answers the phone will make an assessment and decide what needs to be done.



It's often difficult to be angry with parents with problems. Getting angry might make you feel guilty. However, it would be good if you told them at some peaceful moment how bad it makes you feel when they break their promises repeatedly or are constantly dissatisfied. Maybe you can find a way to deal with these situations. Even if no real solution is found, the discussion might be helpful. The parent may not have understood what their behaviour means to you.

Children also often hold onto bitter thoughts and hidden anger. Perhaps mum or dad is always fed up, unfair or unreasonably demanding, or always complaining about something. Maybe they promise to arrange your birthday party, to take you to the movies or say you can bring friends over. Then suddenly they break all their promises. The worst thing is that you never know when this will happen.

The parent might also demand that you repeat their compulsory activities, like washing hands or touching door jambs. They can also say strange things about your friends or neighbours. You might end up arguing with them and not knowing what to believe. The situation might be frightening and depressing. It might make you very angry or make you feel completely powerless and drain all your energy.





Does your mum or dad behave strangely?

Do they attract attention when you're out together? Sometimes people who suffer from mental disorders may behave strangely, talk to themselves, take strange routes or walk in strange ways, or talk to strangers for no reason. It's embarrassing of course, and often children walk a little behind or rush ahead. You might feel bad afterwards, as if you had betrayed mum or dad. Don't be too hard on yourself. It's quite understandable if your parent's behaviour makes you feel embarrassed.

Sometimes you may feel you've had enough. You don't feel like trying anything, not even trying to understand your ill parent. Even though you may have tried to offer comfort and help in all possible ways, nothing seems to be enough. Or your mum or dad may be angry and unpredictable all the time, so you never know what's going to happen next.

You may feel a real burning hatred and bitterness. At the same time, you may have feelings of guilt and worry and sadness. It's easy to understand if you prefer to stay away from home whenever possible or stay in your room. It can help if you tell your friends how you feel. Although situations are often different, every child gets tired of and annoyed with a parent at some point. It's more usual than you think!



STARTING ONE'S OWN LIFE AFTER SCHOOL



Have you graduated from school? Maybe you're looking for a place to live on your own or have already left home. You're facing a new period in your life. It can be difficult to leave home when a parent has problems, especially if the parent will be alone.

It's important that you're able to start your own life without feeling you have let down your mum or dad. Sit down with them and try to think together about how your presence and assistance could be replaced. If your parent can't cope at home, contact the doctor treating them or the local social office to get home assistance. If your parent is very lonely, contact your relatives and your parent's friends and tell them that you're leaving home. Ask them to keep in contact with your parent more regularly. Find somebody the parent can phone to get help.

Have you already moved into your own home, but your mum or dad keeps calling you every day to tell you about their problems? You haven't been able to leave home in a psychological sense. In this case, think of and tell your parent a set time when to contact you, a time that is regular but planned at an interval that's comfortable for you. This may help calm the parent down. When making these arrangements, make sure you have enough mental space to concentrate on your own life.

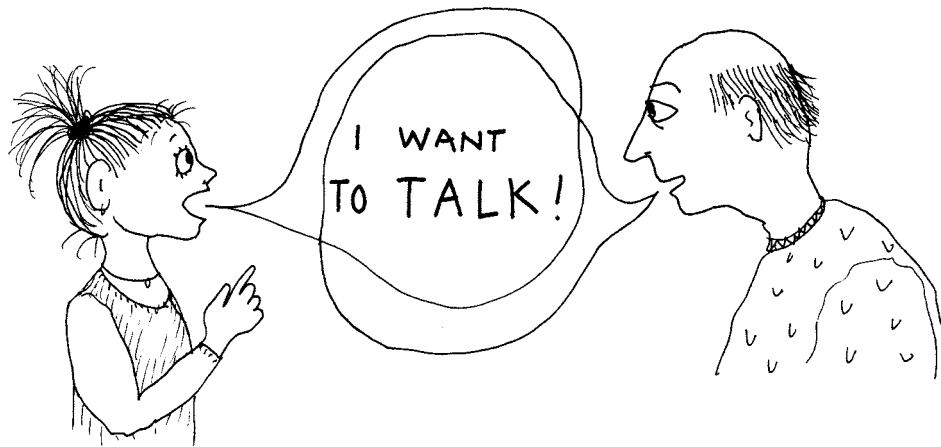
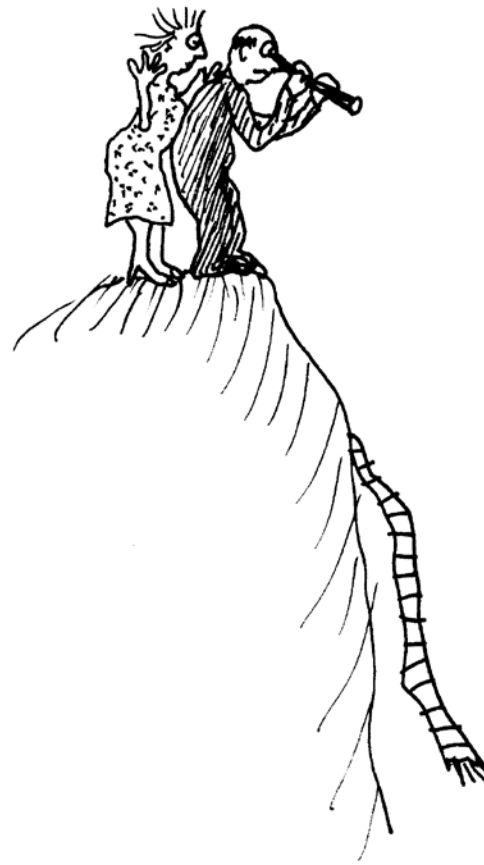


If your parent has been very dependent on you, leaving might be painful for you too. It's painful to see a loved one so lonely. Remember that now it's your turn to start your own life. Sometimes we're in a position where we cause pain to loved ones, despite all efforts to the contrary. Your parent is also responsible for their life. It's possible that your leaving home will mean a possibility for growth even for them, although it's hard to believe at the time.



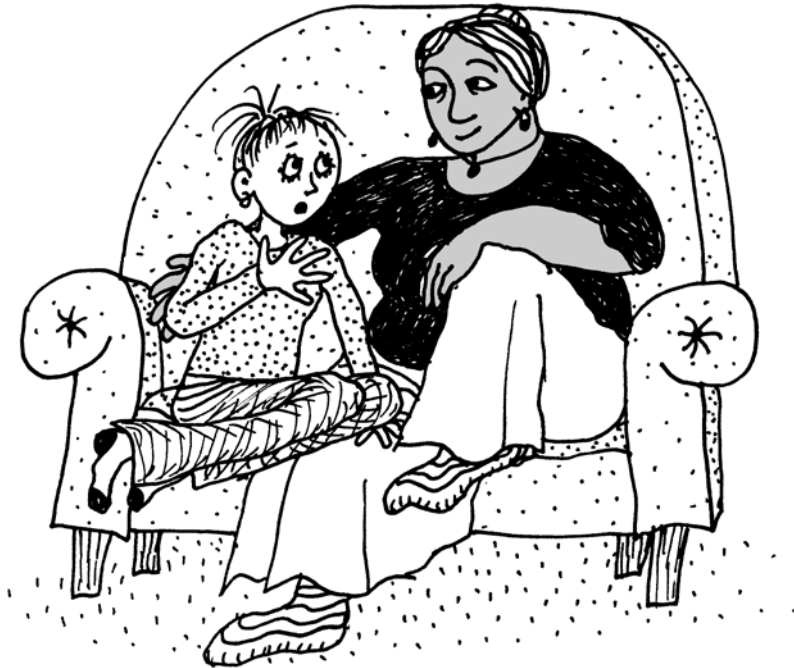
TALKING HELPS

This book has repeatedly recommended that you start discussions with parents and others. There are many reasons why discussions might be helpful.



Firstly, family members are often very much alone with their thoughts and guesses. The parents are worried about increasing their children's burden, and the children also keep quiet. Distance grows between the parents and children. Talking is necessary to solve this dilemma.

Secondly, all people, you included, need someone to talk to about their worries. You need someone to cry to about your parents' problems, and maybe even laugh at them at times. If you have good friends – even one is enough – or close adults, tell them what's happening at home. You can also turn to the school nurse or psychologist or your doctor. The most important thing is that you're not totally alone.



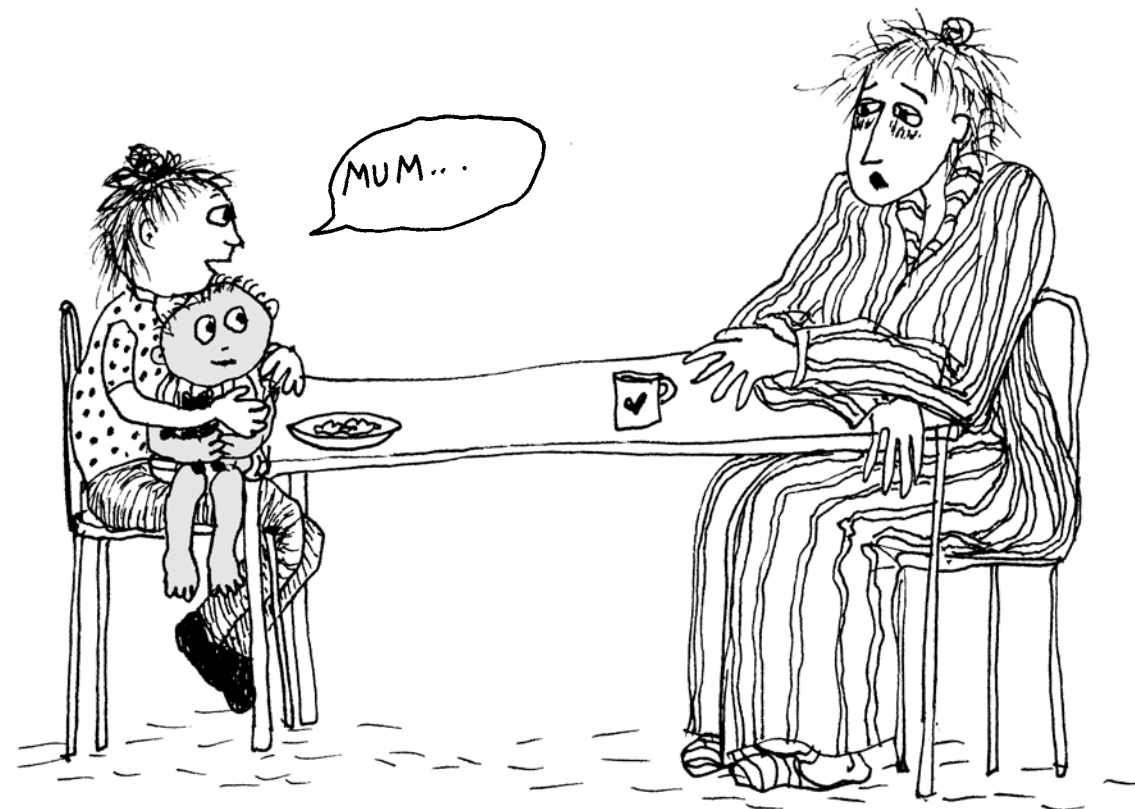
Thirdly, a parent who has mental health problems may have difficulties understanding certain things. You may need to do things against your mum's or dad's will, and that's why it's good if you have another adult who can give you support. For instance, if your parent has hallucinations and believes in them and tells you not to see your friends, you need another adult to tell your parent that you need to spend time with your friends. If you're worried about your mum or dad and wonder if you should call an ambulance against their will, a trusted adult can be worth their weight in gold.

Fourthly, your parent might not agree that they have problems, might not want any treatment and refuse to talk about it. Reading this booklet might have made you think that your parent may be ill, and you are now confused and at a loss. Take this booklet with you and tell an adult you know that this concerns your family.

Who can I talk to?

By yourself or with the help of your parent, think of someone you can depend on outside of the family. It might be a relative, a neighbour, a parent of one of your friends, a coach or teacher, a worker for the local parish or some organisation—whomever you trust. And don't forget your friends!

You can also talk to a professional: your doctor, a school health nurse, a school psychologist or social worker, or a worker at the local family counselling or youth clinic. If you're worried, do not put this off.



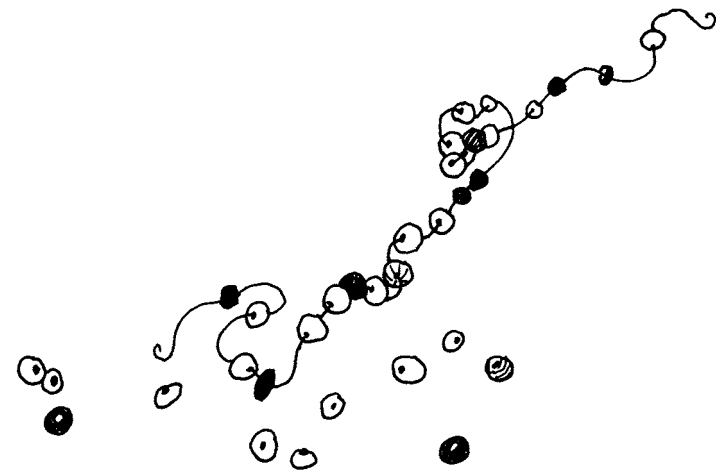
How can I start talking to mum or dad?

A conversation can begin with a few words, which are picked up by the other person. Sometimes the other person only listens, and the conversation continues later. Start with something that worries you or that's on your mind: "Mum, you never smile anymore." or "Dad, why do you take pills?" Start the conversation at a moment when things are going reasonably well, never when one of you is angry.



You can ask mum or dad—or some other adult—to read this booklet. Then show them the things that you want to talk about. You can also ask if you can go with mum or dad to the place where they get treatment. The worker may help your parent to explain the symptoms and difficulties and you can ask about the things that you find important.

A discussion is never finished at one go, rather it builds up with smaller and bigger issues over time. It's like putting pearls in a string. And there are always new opportunities, if you miss one. If one pearl gets dropped, take another one. There are enough pearls in the basket of life, and even dark pearls are beautiful.



IN CONCLUSION

This booklet tries to answer some hard but commonplace questions children and adolescents have when a parent suffers from mental health problems. The aim is to help young people to understand the situation at home and their own feelings, which might be confused at times. It has also been written for parents to read with the aim of starting a conversation.

The booklet has also been written because many young people carry their worries and fears all alone. Young people might believe that there's no one else in a similar position. But there are many young people in a similar situation, at school and everywhere else. You can't tell them apart: they're just ordinary young people. Furthermore, every family has problems of their own; it's part of life.

Hold on to your dreams and what's important to you – you have your life ahead of you.





If you don't know whom to turn to for help, call
Family Association Promoting Mental Health, Association Uusimaa
+358-(0)9-686 0260. More information: <http://www.otu.fi>

Thanks

When I was writing this booklet I received valuable advice from parents who have mental health problems and from children with a parent who has mental health problems. Many thanks!

It would be nice to hear what you think about the booklet. Was it helpful? Is there anything that you would like to add or leave out? Was there anything that was harmful to read?

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