

Parental Mental Health Vulnerability

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Parental Mental Health

Description and context

One in five Australians will experience mental illness¹ and it is estimated that approximately one million (approximately 22%) Australian children live in a household where at least one parent has a mental illness². During 2004/2005 the emotional state of a carer accounted for 7.8% of primary reported issues to the NSW Department of Community Services³.

Mental health can be understood as a continuum, ranging from a state of emotional wellbeing, to having an illness that may affect thoughts, feelings and behaviour⁴ and significantly impact on people's lives and productivity. Mental illness is used to describe diagnosable illnesses that significantly interfere with a person's cognitive, emotional or social skills. Mental health problems are generally considered to be less severe and of shorter duration than mental illness, however may develop into mental illness. Therefore while mental illness and mental health problems are generally used separately with different meanings in the published literature, in this practice resource 'mental health problem' is used and includes both mental health problems and mental illness.

While diagnosis is important and will help to inform your work,

Brighter Futures is focussed on how parental mental health problems and/or illness adversely affects parenting capacity and the potential impact this has on the well being and safety of children. Remember that some parents participating in Brighter Futures may experience undiagnosed and/or unmanaged mental health problems, this can be especially challenging and it is important to seek support and assistance as required.

Research tells us that there are compelling links between mental health problems, poverty, discrimination and social exclusion⁵. Therefore in your work with families with mental health problems it is important to consider how individual, family and community circumstances may influence the mental health of parents you are working with⁶. Also remember that women and people from minority and marginalised groups are often at increased risks of poor mental health due to a wide range of factors disproportionately experienced by those groups in our community including discrimination, violence, trauma and low socio-economic status⁷.

Families with children aged 0-3 years are a priority group in Brighter Futures and it is important to remember that during pregnancy and in the first few years following childbirth, women are at increased risk of new and recurrent mental health problems⁸. In Australia 10-15% of

women experience post natal depression and 50% of postnatal depression begins during pregnancy⁹.

Some families participating in Brighter Futures may be affected by both mental illness and substance misuse commonly referred to as dual diagnosis.

The Dual Diagnosis support kit provides a comprehensive range of resources designed to support effective practice with children and families affected by both mental health problems and substance misuse.

Common Mental Health Problems

Description

Some mental health problems are more prevalent in our community than others. While a brief summary of the main symptoms of the most common mental health problems has been provided, remember that diagnosis of mental health problems is the responsibility of mental health professionals. You are not required to be a mental health expert and it is important that you speak with your manager or contact the area mental health team if you are concerned that a parent you are working with may be experiencing a mental health problem. By carefully observing the parent's behaviour and describing in detail these behaviours you will be able to provide accurate and valuable information to mental health professionals.



NSW Department of
Community Services

■ **Depression**¹⁰

Depression describes a group of illnesses characterised by excessive or long-term depressed mood which affects the person's life. Symptoms of depression can include:

- an unusually sad mood that does not go away
- loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- tiredness and lack of energy
- loss of confidence or poor self-esteem
- feeling guilty when they are not at fault
- sleeping difficulties – including sleeping too much
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- moving more slowly or, sometimes becoming agitated and unable to settle
- loss of interest in food or sometimes eating too much
- thoughts of suicide
- feelings of anxiety
- the most serious forms of depression can include psychosis (disorder of thoughts).

■ **Anxiety Disorders**¹¹

Anxiety disorders are a group of illnesses that are characterised by persistent feelings of high anxiety and fear of panic that are so extreme they significantly

interfere with a person's daily life. Symptoms of an anxiety disorder can include:

- constant worry about harm affecting themselves or loved ones
- fear of panic
- feelings of extreme panic in situations where most people would not be afraid
- intense and irrational fears about particular objects or situations
- rituals that are usually time consuming and seriously interfere with everyday life – for example people may be driven to constantly wash their hands.

■ **Bipolar mood disorder**¹²

People with bipolar mood disorder experience recurrent episodes of depressed and elated moods that can be mild to severe. The common symptoms of depression are covered above. 'Mania' is used to describe the most severe state of extreme elation. Common symptoms of mania include varying degrees of the following:

- elevated mood – feelings of extreme happiness and increased energy with a reduced need for sleep
- lack of insight and irritability – the person may get angry and irritable with people who disagree or dismiss their sometimes unrealistic plans or ideas

- rapid thinking and speech – eg jumping from subject to subject
- lack of inhibitions and reduced ability to anticipate the consequences of their actions – eg spending large amounts of money
- grandiose plans and beliefs – eg people can believe they are unusually talented or gifted.

■ **Schizophrenia**¹³

Schizophrenia interferes with a person's mental functions and in the long term may cause changes to a person's personality. Key symptoms of schizophrenia can include:

- thought disorders – a person's thoughts and speech may be jumbled and disjointed and they may think that someone is interfering with their mind
- delusions – false beliefs of persecution, guilt, greatness or being under outside control
- hallucinations – most commonly involves hearing voices but can also include seeing, feeling, tasting or smelling things that are not actually there.

Other symptoms of schizophrenia can include:

- loss of drive and motivation
- dulled and reduced expression of emotions
- decreased participation in social activities
- thinking difficulties.

Borderline Personality Disorder¹⁴

Borderline personality disorder is diagnosed as a cluster of long-standing problems with relationships, identity or sense of self, and the control of emotions and behaviour. Symptoms of borderline personality disorder include:

- problems with emotions and moods
- problems with thinking
- problems with self-damaging behaviour
- problems in relationships.

If you would like to learn more about mental health problems, there's a lot of information available to help you do this. Utilise resources from the endorsed websites below and work together with other agencies where possible to maximise the help you can provide to families.

Endorsed websites

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing – in particular see *The Interrelations of Social Capital with Health and Mental Health* a discussion paper for the National Mental Health Strategy.

SANE – Sane Australia is a national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness.

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia – this site contains valuable information on a wide range of topics including the use

and possible side effects of psychiatric medications.

Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health – a comprehensive website that includes fact sheets addressing a wide range of issues including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Health and the *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*.

NSW Centre for Mental Health – The Centre for Mental Health is responsible for developing, managing and coordinating NSW Health Department policy in relation to mental health services.

Blue Pages Depression Information – This information is compiled by ANU Centre for Mental Health Research.

Beyond Blue – It is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance misuse disorders in Australia.

Black Dog Institute – The Black Dog Institute is an educational, research, clinical and community-orientated facility dedicated to improving understanding, diagnosis and treatment of mood disorders.

DepressioNet – At DepressioNet you will find a comprehensive 24/7 resource of information, help and peer support for those touched by depression.

Impact of parental mental health problems on parenting capacity and child wellbeing and safety

While mental health problems can directly impact on a parent's capacity to meet the needs of their children¹⁵, it is more commonly the interaction between parental mental problems and other factors including social support, income and drug and alcohol misuse that influences the level of risk for children¹⁶.

When supporting families where a parent has a mental health problem it is important to be aware of the potential impact of the mental health problem on the family, parents and children.

Families in which a parent experiences a mental health problem:

- are more likely to live in poverty and frequently face unemployment¹⁷
- are more likely to live with housing problems such as inappropriate housing and insecure tenancy¹⁸
- as a result families affected by mental health problems may often be transient
- often suffer a loss of family and social life that can be made worse by stigma and discrimination¹⁹
- often encounter family disruption, disorganisation and participate less in social and leisure activities²⁰

- if separated even for short periods (eg during hospitalisation) can experience strong feelings of grief and loss²¹.

Parents affected by a mental health problem:

- often feel like they are losing control over their capacity to do things as well. This may include their ability to relate to their children in a way they would like to, their capacity to exercise adult responsibility or their ability or right to manage their own money²²
- can experience a loss of physical well-being as a result of sedation, trauma, humiliation, impaired memory and poor self esteem²³
- may be more vulnerable to violence and manipulation by others
- are more likely to suffer strained relationships and be single parents²⁴
- may find it more difficult to meet the emotional needs of their children²⁵
- often have grave fears of losing their children and may therefore resist treatment, particularly hospitalisation²⁶
- sometimes find their children's behaviour difficult to manage which can contribute to a worsening of symptoms associated with their mental health problems²⁷
- may find it more difficult to trust and use services (eg respite) leading to increased isolation. This issue can be especially significant for families from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Children of parents with a mental health problem:

- are often extremely worried about developing mental health problems themselves²⁸
- sometimes feel they need to keep their parent's mental health problems hidden and fear they will be removed from the parent/family if the mental health problems are exposed²⁹
- often worry about their parents and provide a major care-giving role. This can include looking after their brothers and sisters, taking care of the ill parent and taking on other household responsibilities beyond their age³⁰
- often feel sad because they don't have a 'normal' family and sometimes wish that they were able to live somewhere else or be part of another family³¹. As a result children may seek comfort and nurturing from inappropriate adults
- sometimes feel guilty about being relieved or happy when their parent is in hospital or if they are having a good time when they are away from their parent³²
- are more likely to receive unpredictable and/or inadequate care. This can be confusing for infants and children and lead to unmet developmental needs and behavioural problems³³
- are more likely to be exposed to violence or conflict in the home. This may be because the parent experiences psychotic episodes or because of other co-existing difficulties such as drug and alcohol use, domestic violence or unemployment³⁴
- are more likely to experience disruption and disorganisation in their schooling, leisure or social activities³⁵
- are at increased risk of developing mental health problems because of one or more of the following factors – genetic disposition, the impact of mental health problems on parenting style and learnt behaviour³⁶
- 25-50% of Australian children who have a parent with mental illness will experience mental health or behavioural problems during childhood³⁷.

Evidence-based practice principles

In 2004 the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association (AICAFMHA) published the *Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI)* range of complementary resources for services, workers, parents and

young people. These resources are nationally recognised and can inform and support your work with families where a parent has a mental health problem. The following practice principles summarise key themes and strategies that feature in these resources.

It's normal for families where a parent has a mental health problem to experience strong feelings such as bewilderment, anger, grief or loss and it is important to:

- understand that it takes time to build a trusting relationship; transparency and openness in your work will assist you to build a trusting and supportive relationship with families. You may find it helpful to review the key principles of [active engagement](#); these are particularly important when working with people affected by mental health problems
- work in partnership with families and at the pace they feel comfortable with
- respect and value the goals of the family and prioritize these in the family action plan and your work
- understand and think carefully about the impact of culture, disability and non-traditional family structures on each family's and individual's experience of mental health problems
- talk with the family about the resources and positive strategies they already use to manage parental mental health problems

- think carefully about how your conversations and work with other service providers will be consistent with the principles of the Brighter Futures program including strengths-based, partnership with family members, inclusiveness and transparency in decision making.

For parents

- talk with parents about how they are managing their family's basic needs including housing, food, using community resources (eg public transport) and paying the bills. When these needs are met parents will find it easier to manage their mental health problems
- help parents identify their skills and resources (eg managing money on a tight budget, always getting the kids to school or a supportive friend) and help parents to maintain family routines like bedtime stories and celebrating birthdays
- help parents to talk with their children about their mental health problems in a way that acknowledges their children's feelings and worries. [Children of Mentally Ill Consumers \(COMIC\)](#), includes the *Supporting Our Family* kit, a planning tool that can help families talk about parental mental health problems and plan how the family will manage if a parent becomes ill

- help parents plan for their children's needs. This is vitally important and ensures parents have a say in what happens to them should they become ill
- help parents build positive social networks and relationships
- encourage parents to look after themselves by setting aside some time every week for something they enjoy such as playing sport, or a craft activity. Also encourage them to get enough sleep, physical activity and maintain a healthy diet.

For children

Children often hide their feelings especially if they believe that their parent's mental health problem is a secret. Therefore when working with children it is important that you explain carefully that:

- they did not cause their parent's mental health problem
- that their safety is important and they have a right to feel safe at all times
- that they are not alone, and that many of the feelings and worries they experience are common for children whose parents have mental health problems.

The following practice principles will support your work with children:

- help children to understand their parent's mental health problems in an age appropriate and sensitive manner
- assist children to tell their story in their own words

- assist children to identify people who can support them for example a grandparent, teacher or family friend
- assist children to participate in social activities where they can establish positive friendships, have some fun and they and their parents can have a break from each other. Remember to think about any barriers to participation that parents may need support to address such as cost or lack of parental motivation/energy
- understand and respect the role that children and young people may have in providing care for their parents and ensure that they are supported to participate in decisions regarding their family
- when appropriate encourage and assist children to prepare for possible episodes of illness their parent/s may experience.

Resources for children

A range of books to support your work with children and young people have been published and include those listed below.

➤ Children 0-6 years

JAKE'S DINOSAUR

Anne Sved Williams (1996)
A picture book for 3-6 year olds.
Available from Helen Mayo House, Glenside Hospital, PO Box 17 Eastwood SA 5063
Phone (08) 8303 1451

ROBBY ROSE AND MONKEY

A. Louis (1995)
A picture book for 3-6 year olds.
Available from Helen Mayo House, Glenside Hospital, PO Box 17 Eastwood SA 5063
Phone (08) 83031451

THE BLUE POLAR BEAR

A picture book for 5-7 year olds.
This book is included in the DoCS *Dual Diagnosis Kit*

➤ Children 9-12 years

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

SANE Guide to mental illness for children. Available from the SANE Bookshop. www.sane.org

HANDLE WITH CARE

A workbook about mental illness for 8-12 year olds. Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (WA), 275 Stirling Street, Perth, Western Australia and ARAFMI Newcastle. arafmihunter@exe.ail.com.au

THE FLYING DREAM STORY

A book for 8-12 year olds.
This book is included in the DoCS Dual Diagnosis Kit.

➤ Adolescents 13-18 years

ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS –

a booklet for 13-16 year olds.
Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (WA), 275 Stirling Street, Perth, Western Australia and ARAFMI Newcastle
arafmihunter@exe.ail.com.au

THE ILLUSTRATED MOTHER

Jacqueline Wilson (2000) About a mother grappling with mental illness and its effect on her two daughters.

JOE'S DIARY

Tells the story of a year in the life of Joe and his mother who has schizophrenia. SANE Australia
www.sane.org

SAVING FRANCESCA

Melina Marchetta (2004)
Written for older teenagers, this novel is narrated by a girl who has just commenced Year Eleven at a new school and she and her family are also trying to deal with the effects of her mother's depression. Penguin Australia Books/Viking

Specialised services and resources for families

Specialised Mental Health Services

Community mental health services can be accessed across NSW by contacting your local community health centre or community mental health service. The following links provide easy access to contact details for both community health centres and community mental health services in your local area health service.

[South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service](#)

[Northern Sydney/Central Coast Area Health Service](#)

[Sydney South West Area Health Service](#)

[Sydney West Area Health Service](#)

[Greater Southern Area Health Service](#)

[Greater Western Area Health Service](#)

[Hunter New England Area Health Service](#)

[North Coast Area Health Service](#)

[The Mental Health Association NSW Inc](#) offers the Mental Health Information Service, a confidential and free telephone and email helpline during business hours (1300 794 991 or email info@mentalhealth.asn.au). The Information Service is able to provide information about mental health and mental health services in your local area. The Mental Health Association has also published *The Way Ahead*, a directory that lists every mental health service including non-government organisations throughout NSW. The directory can be accessed by contacting the DoCS Library on (02) 9716 2632.

The 24 hour Mental Health Access line based at the Rozelle Hospital and staffed by Mental Health Nurses is also able to provide service information and referral to community based mental health services across the state. The Mental Health Access line can be contacted on phone 1800 636 825.

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COMPI)

Remember COMPI workers are employed in each area health service and can support your work with children. The [COPMI website](#) also includes the range of specialised professional programs and services available in NSW. Spend some time exploring this great website and becoming familiar with the COPMI programs and services.

Services and Supports for New Mums

Early Childhood Health Centres are established in each Area Health Service and are staffed by Child and Family Health Nurses specifically trained in the care of infants, young children and new mums. The nurses will be an important partner in your work and it is important to check with new mums that they are linked into and able to attend their local Early Childhood Health Centre. Checkout your local centre and spend some time getting to know the nurses and the programs that have been developed to support pregnant women and new mums including:

- **Safe Start** – rolled out in conjunction with health home visiting, Safe Start provides a framework for screening mums during pregnancy and after birth to identify any mental health issues, including depression
- **Health Home Visiting** – all parents with a new baby are offered a free home visit from a Child and Family Health

Nurse within the first four weeks after birth. At this visit the nurse provides parents with advice, screening to identify any issues with the child and/or family and information regarding local supports and services

- **Aboriginal Maternal and Infant Health Strategy (AMIHS)** – AMHIS aims to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal women during pregnancy and the early years. The model employs a community midwife and Aboriginal Health Worker to provide culturally appropriate antenatal care for women.

Other specialised services for families with infants and young children include:

- **The Tresillian Family Care Centre** – includes the 24 hour Parent Help line and is able to provide advice and support regarding a wide range of parenting issues. Phone the Parent Help line on (02) 9787 0855
- **The Karitane Parent Help Line** available 24 hours on (02) 9794 1852 and again is able to provide advice and support on a wide range of parenting issues
- **Mothersafe** provides advice and information regarding prescription and non prescription drugs during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Mothersafe is available Monday to Friday 8:30-5 pm (02) 9382 6539

➤ **Australian Breast Feeding Association** – (02) 9639 8686

Specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services

Socio-economic disadvantage and historical factors (eg Stolen Generation) continue to impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians and contribute to high rates of mental health problems, overrepresentation in welfare and justice systems, family violence, substance abuse/misuse and a range of other issues. As a result Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may often require additional support that offers a holistic view of mental health that includes the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the whole community.

The following websites provide specialised information and details of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Healthy Vibe – This website provides information on a wide range of Indigenous health issues and lists Aboriginal Medical Services across NSW.

Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet – One-stop info-shop for people interested in improving the health of Indigenous Australians.

Mental Health Coordinating Council - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Important Information to consider in relation to Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people and culture in relation to mental health.

The Aboriginal Disability Network – Connects together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities so they can tell their stories, give each other support and create a voice for change.

Koori DrugInfo – This website has fact sheets on how to help family and friends who have problems with drug or alcohol use. Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health – Engagement of Indigenous clients in mental health services: what role do cultural differences play?

Specialist culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and multicultural services

Experiences of marginalisation, educational disadvantage, unemployment, poor housing, trans-generational stress, isolation and cultural differences can all significantly impact on the mental health of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds³⁸. Refugees and survivors of torture and trauma particularly experience very high rates of mental illness and psychological distress and generally require additional support³⁹. Working in partnership with skilled and experienced CALD workers to support parents from ethnically or culturally diverse communities is important and will ensure you are able to sensitively interpret and understand language, culture and parenting practices.

Transcultural Mental Health Centre (TMHC) – The TMHC is a state wide service that promotes access to mental health services for people from CALD backgrounds. The Transcultural Mental Health Centre also offers sessional counsellors in variety of languages and translated resources.

NSW Service for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). STARTTS provides a holistic range of professional services to facilitate the healing process for refugees who have been exposed to torture and trauma. The service also provides early health assessment, intervention services and youth programs to newly arrived people from refugee like backgrounds. STARTTS and the NSW Refugee Health Service has produced Working with Refugees – A guide for Social Workers, a comprehensive guide for practitioners seeking to develop and extend response to the particular needs of refugees in our community.

NSW Migrant Resource Centres Association (MRCA) – NSW MRCA Inc is a newly incorporated body of 13 migrant resource centres across NSW. It provides settlement services to newly arrived humanitarian entrants across NSW including Initial Information and Orientation Assistance services.

Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA) – MMHA links a wide range of state and territory mental health specialists and services, advocacy groups and

tertiary institutions to promote the mental health and well being of Australia's diverse communities.

Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) – The MHCC is the peak body for non-government organisations (NGOs) working for mental health throughout NSW. MHCCs membership includes NGOs, both specialist and mainstream, and other bodies interested in mental health. It aims to provide leadership and representation on mental health issues and to improve the mental health of the community by promoting and developing non-government organisations in NSW to provide strong quality services.

Young Carers – The Young Carer Project at Carers NSW was created to make a positive difference to the lives of young carers (25 yrs and under) and their families. The site also includes a helpful information sheet for young carers, 'My Family Doesn't Speak English'.

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia – Information on topics such as the language, religion, history, general attitudes, personal appearance, lifestyle practices of the homelands of many of the people who make up the Australian community.

An Introductory Resource Guide to Islam and Muslim Communities – The resources guide was developed to help DoCS staff service the Muslim community in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Women

The NSW Premiers Department Office for Women website includes a page of referral and crisis numbers for women including counselling and support services, multicultural services and housing support.

Endorsed research and resources

General mental health resources

Research in Practice – Research in Practice is the largest children and family research and implementation project in England and Wales. *Parental mental health problems: messages from research, policy and practice by Jo Tunnard (2004).*

Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) – MHCA is the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector, committed to achieving better mental health for all Australians.

Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) – MHCC is the peak body for non-government organisations (NGOs) working for mental health throughout NSW.

Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH) – CRRMH aims to bring quality education and research programmes to all rural areas of NSW through effective partnerships. The Centre will access the collective knowledge and

expertise of universities, area mental health services and the resources in rural communities of NSW.

The Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria – Based in Melbourne, Australia, the MHRI concentrates its efforts towards understanding Schizophrenia, Bipolar and major mood disorder and Alzheimer's disease.

Reachout – A web-based service that inspires young people to help themselves through tough times. The aim of the service is to improve young people's mental health and well being by providing support information and referrals.

National Child Protection Clearinghouse – An information, advisory and research unit focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect and associated family violence.

Child Maltreatment and Mental Disorder – A discussion paper on issues related to child maltreatment and mental disorder.

Mental Health Carers Arafmi Australia – An agency dedicated to the provision of support for families, carers and friends with mental health issues.

ORYGEN – A unique organisation made up of a specialist youth mental health service, a research centre and arrange of education, advocacy and health promotion activities.

More resources that focus on parenting and children

Parenting SA – Check out the widely used and free Parenting Easy Guides.

Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association –

Actively promoting the mental health and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and their families/carers.

Child and Youth Health (SA) –

The site provides a wealth of news and practical health information for parents, carers and young people.

Raising Children Network –

A detailed website that includes a resource guide for your local area.

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