

# *Dual Diagnosis*

A resource for parents



This publication was developed by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) through the National Illicit Drug Strategy sponsored by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services.

DoCS acknowledges the contribution made by numerous organisations and individuals to the development of this resource.

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ISBN No 0 7310 4371 5

July 2009

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# Help for parents with dual diagnosis

Being a parent is perhaps the most important job you will ever do. It can be fun, rewarding and challenging. All parents need support sometimes to help them find the best ways of looking after their children. If you or your partner have a mental illness and drug or alcohol problem, there are some specific issues to consider when caring for your children. Everyone wants the best for their children – this booklet is designed to help you care for your children at all times, but especially when things are a bit tough.

## What is dual diagnosis?

'Dual diagnosis' is when a person is affected by both mental illness and drug or alcohol use.

For some people, using drugs or alcohol can trigger mental health problems like depression, anxiety or psychosis.

Some people with mental illness use drugs or alcohol to block out the symptoms of their illness or the side-effects of medication. Others may use drugs or alcohol in an attempt to relieve stress or to feel better. This can affect your physical and mental health.

Dual diagnosis affects people differently. It depends on the type of mental health problem and symptoms, the drugs or alcohol you use and how these combine together. It can also depend on what type of support or treatment you receive.

## How does dual diagnosis affect me as a parent?

Coping with mental health problems and drug or alcohol use is difficult and having the responsibility of children can be stressful. You may be feeling angry, sad, depressed, scared or high. You may find yourself experiencing lots of different moods at different times.

You may sometimes find it a bit difficult to look after your children while you are not feeling too well yourself. It's important to know that there is support for you and your children.

As a parent, you may not be aware of the effects that your mental health problems and drug or alcohol use can have on your children.

Some of the common effects of dual diagnosis are:

- > you may find it difficult to concentrate
- > it may be hard to get organised and do your housework and shopping
- > you may find it hard to get out of bed in the morning and get your children off to school

- > you may find yourself getting angry or upset with your children
- > you may find it difficult to listen to your children or talk to them
- > you may not cope well with lots of noise – eg the sound of a baby crying or children playing
- > it may be difficult to set boundaries with your children – eg when they should go to bed
- > you may feel ashamed to talk about the problems you are having with your children
- > you may not be able to care for your children and may feel afraid that your children are going to be taken away from you.

### How does my illness affect my children?

Children may feel confused or frightened by the symptoms of different mental health problems or by seeing you using drugs or alcohol. Children are affected in lots of different ways. Sometimes they may:

- > feel scared, angry, sad, embarrassed, ashamed or lonely
- > blame themselves for your illness
- > worry that they will develop mental health or drug and alcohol problems
- > try to pretend that things are okay
- > be too ashamed to go to school
- > want to live somewhere else
- > try to gain your attention by being naughty or rude
- > become secretive and not want to tell you things
- > try to protect the younger children by looking after them
- > find it difficult to make friends with other children
- > find it difficult to do their homework or study.

### What will happen to my children if I have to go to hospital?

If you have to go to hospital for treatment, it's important that your children are properly cared for while you are away.

Most hospital or rehabilitation services do not provide childcare or accommodation for families. However, there are other support services that can help you if you go into hospital or treatment.

You may be able to ask a relative or friend to care for your children while you are away. If possible, it's good to try to organise this before you need to go to hospital so that you have some support ready.

### What will happen to my children if they go into foster care?

Sometimes your children may need to go into foster care. Foster care provides a safe, stable environment for children and young people who can't live with their parents.

Foster carers will care for your children and make sure they are looked after while you're getting help for yourself.

The time that children spend in foster care can vary from just one day to a few weeks, months or years, depending on what your children may need.



*You may sometimes find it a bit difficult to look after your children while you are not feeling too well yourself. It's important to know that there is support for you and your children.*



## How can I help my children?

Even though you may be finding it hard to cope, there are lots of things you can do to help your children.

Research shows that children need a combination of warmth (praise, attention and hugs work well) and clear boundaries.

Parents can best help their kids by being adaptable. This means you need to be:

- > perceptive (able to see what's happening around your child, including the impact of your own behaviour as a parent on your child)
- > responsive (able to connect with your child, including being sensitive to your child, expressing warmth and affection and adjusting your behaviour based on your child's needs)
- > flexible (able to respond in different ways according to the demands of specific situations, including having a range of different ideas on what to do).

In a nutshell, positive parenting involves:

- > ensuring children live in a safe, interesting environment
- > creating a positive learning environment and being available to your child

- > using assertive discipline
- > having realistic expectations of your child
- > taking care of yourself as a parent.

All parents find that at times it can be hard to be perceptive, responsive or flexible, or to provide positive parenting. However, if you notice that your mental illness or use of drugs and alcohol is consistently affecting your ability in any of these areas, then it is important to seek help.

Here are some tips on how to look after your kids even when you are not feeling too good:

- > if you are using drugs or alcohol, try to make sure your children are safe in the care of a sober, well adult while you are using and 'coming down'
- > always store drugs, including prescription medicines, in a safe place where your children can't get to them
- > try to set up some support people for your children to turn to when you are sick, such as a grandparent or other relative, family friend or teacher
- > enrol your children in child care, after-school services, vacation care or sporting groups. You may be able to get financial support for these services through Centrelink

- > children respond well to routine. Try and set up routines that work for you even when you are not feeling too well. For example, if you know that it's hard for you get out of bed in the morning, get the breakfast things ready and pack lunches the night before
- > some health services offer camps or support groups where children and young people can get together for peer support and to learn coping skills
- > some children and young people whose parents have a dual diagnosis may see a counsellor or have regular contact with a support group
- > talk to your children when you do feel well and encourage them to tell you how they feel. It is important for your children to understand that you do love them even if you are not always able to care for them
- > have a list of people and emergency phone numbers that your children can contact if they need to get some help if you are unwell. Talk to your children about what to do and keep the list in a handy place for example on the fridge or near the telephone.

## Where can I get help?

There are lots of places you can contact to get help for yourself and for your children.

Support workers and caseworkers can help provide information about services in your local area.

You can get free information about mental illness or drug and alcohol use from your local library or health service.

## Health and community services

It's important that you find a doctor or support service that you feel comfortable with, especially if you have both mental health and substance use concerns.

Some community health centres have a dual diagnosis service. If not, contact your mental health or drug and alcohol teams about what service will be best for you. Depending on your mental health and drug or alcohol problems, you may be able to get treatment and support at home, without having to go to hospital or a rehabilitation centre. It is important to ask what options are available.

You can take a friend, family member or support person with you when you go to see a doctor or support service. Some services can also come to your home if transport is difficult.

Discuss your mental health and drug or alcohol concerns and treatment needs honestly with staff. Most health and support services can work together to meet your and your family's needs, and you can identify the services you would like involved.

## Parenting and family support

Local family support services offer a range of services to help parents and families experiencing stress. Services include parent education and support groups, playgroups, counselling and general support.

Some community health centres also offer programs for parents with mental health or drug and alcohol concerns.

Try to get help early, before you reach crisis point.

## Support networks

It is important that you get support from family, friends, community workers and support groups. You may find that your family or friends don't understand your situation. You may also find it difficult to talk to your family or friends about what you are going through. There is information available about dual diagnosis that will help your family and friends understand your problems.

There are services such as volunteer home visiting programs that provide social support and can help you with the housework or take you to appointments. Ask your support worker or caseworker if programs like these are available in your area.

Booklets like *Dual diagnosis: mental illness and substance abuse – information and coping strategies for families* can help to provide information about dual diagnosis. You can obtain a copy of this book from ARAFMI Queensland Inc. (07) 3254 1881.

## For more information contact:

### NSW Family Services (FamS)

For information about Family Support Services in your local area  
(02) 9692 9999  
[www.nswfamilyservices.asn.au](http://www.nswfamilyservices.asn.au)

### Lifeline

24 hour telephone counselling and referral to support services  
13 11 14

### Parentline

Confidential help for parents of children up to 18 years of age  
24 hours, 7 days a week  
1300 1300 52  
[www.centacare.org](http://www.centacare.org)

### Child Care Access Hotline

Advice on local child care options  
1800 670 305

### SANE Australia Helpline

9am-5pm weekdays for mental health information and referral to support services  
1800 18 SANE (7263)  
[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)



