

Understanding Mental Illness in a Parent, Guardian, or Caregiver

If someone in your family has a mental illness, the way they think, feel, and behave may be impacted. Depending on the type of mental health challenge and whether or not it's being treated, they may act in ways that are inconsistent, confusing, embarrassing, or even scary. It's important to remember that it's no one's fault for struggling with their mental health—it's not your family member's fault and it's certainly not your fault. It is also important to know that there are many effective therapies, treatments, and strategies for managing mental health challenges and there is always hope for recovery. As teachers and school staff, your compassion is vital when interacting with students, but it is not a bottomless well. Self care, boundaries and other methods are needed to avoid compassion fatigue and burn-out.

Some children of parents with a history of mental illness might feel afraid that they will develop a mental illness too. While there is a genetic component to some mental health challenges, there are also many social and environmental factors that contribute to mental illness. There are many ways you can prevent mental illness by taking care of your mental health through self-care practises and by seeking support if you are struggling.

Here are some suggestions for understanding and accepting a parent, guardian, or caregiver with a mental health challenge:

Educate Yourself: There is still a significant amount of stigma and misunderstandings when it comes to mental health challenges. Thankfully, there are lots of educational resources you can access online or through a therapist or your school that can help you understand what your parent, guardian, or caregiver is going through. Once you understand more about the mental health condition your parent, guardian, or caregiver is struggling with, it can seem less confusing or scary.



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Seek Support: A compassionate counsellor or therapist can help you come to terms with your specific childhood experiences and develop greater awareness and understanding when it comes to your caregiver, guardian, or parents and your relationship to them. Sharing your feelings and concerns with people you trust, including supportive friends, can be very helpful for your own mental wellbeing.

It's Not Your Fault: When a parent, guardian or caregiver is suffering from a mental health challenge it is not your fault and you are not responsible for their actions or behaviour. It's important not to blame yourself and to realise that this is something out of your control.

Feel Your Feelings: You may have many different emotions around what your parent, guardian or caregiver is going through and all of them are okay. Rather than judging your emotions or trying not to feel them, acknowledge what you are feeling and know that you are not alone. Living with a parent, guardian, or caregiver with mental illness can be complex and it's normal for this to bring up strong feelings.

Prioritise Your Own Wellbeing: Supporting or living with someone who is struggling with their mental health can be challenging and therefore it's important to find strategies and tools for nurturing your own wellbeing. This may be through therapy,



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spending time doing things that bring you joy, making sure you are getting enough sleep, good food, and exercise, practising meditation or mindfulness, spending time in nature, surrounding yourself with supportive people, setting healthy boundaries, and more.

Know there is Hope: When it comes to mental illness, there is always hope for improvement and recovery. There are many effective treatments and supports for people dealing with mental health challenges.

Living with a parent, guardian or caregiver who is struggling with their mental health can bring up many complex emotions. Children often assume that what their parents, guardian, or caregivers are dealing with is somehow their fault, but it's especially important to know that no one can cause a mental illness and it's nobody's fault. By educating yourself about your parent, guardian or caregiver's mental health, seeking support, feeling your feelings, and prioritizing your own mental wellbeing, you can regain a sense of control and learn to understand and accept what your loved one is going through. There are many effective treatments for mental illness and there is always hope for recovery.

If you feel overwhelmed, confused, or alone, there are many resources for children and youth who have a parent, guardian, or caregiver with mental illness.



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Stigma-Free Society Help and Community Resources

<https://stigmafreesociety.com/help-and-resources>

Kids & Teens in Control Groups

www.bcsc.org/kidsincontrol

Canadian Mental Health Association - BC Division

www.cmha.bc.ca

1-800-555-8222

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness)

www.copmi.net.au/kids-youngpeople

HeretoHelp

www.heretohelp.bc.ca

B.C. Schizophrenia Society

www.bcsc.org

Foundry BC

foundrybc.ca

YouthinBC (online chat service)

www.youthinbc.com

Kids Help Phone

www.kidshelpphone.ca

1-800-668-6868

Crisis Centre Suicide Line

1-800-SUICIDE

(1-800-784-2433)

