

Should you discuss your mental illness with your kids?

[Studies](#) show that if parents diagnosed with a mental illness don't discuss it with their children, their kids could be misinformed and worry. Misperceptions and fears can actually be worse than reality; kids may be asking themselves questions such as:



Did I do something wrong?
Is this my fault?
Do Mom and Dad still love me?
What will happen to me?

While it is understandable that you may want to shelter your children from your struggles with mental illness, they likely already know that something is amiss. It is important that kids get their information first-hand from you versus misinformed friends or relatives, mass media or their own overactive imaginations.

Countering the effects of misinformation is a compelling reason to talk to kids about your mental health, but it's not the only one. Discussing your mental illness, or that of your partner, can help children [build resiliency](#), increase understanding and improve their ability to cope with a parent suffering from a mental illness.

Risk and protective factors

Having a parent with mental illness is [one of several risk factors](#) for children to develop a mental illness of their own. Other risk factors include social isolation, childhood trauma, and substance use. However, having a parent with a mental illness does *not* mean that your child will develop one. In fact, many "protective" factors may come into play, including: good physical health, strong relationships, sound problem-solving skills, a sense of belonging and a feeling of control over one's life.

Clearly, it's important to discuss your (or your partner's) mental illness with your children, but are you prepared? Below are a few tips for discussing this situation should it occur within your family.

- **Be honest and prepared to answer questions.** This requires some homework on your part. Speak with mental healthcare providers and gather as much information as possible from authoritative sources. Anticipate questions and be prepared with facts.
- **Reassure your children that their feelings and emotions are normal.** It's completely normal for people to feel shocked, embarrassed, scared, angry or uncertain after learning a loved one has a mental illness. Remind them that it's not their fault, or anyone else's.
- **Be age appropriate.** Younger children will need shorter explanations and fewer details than their older siblings.
- **Explain that the condition is an illness.** For example, you might ask the kids to think back to a time they were sick. "Remember how lousy you felt and how grumpy you were?" As they nod in agreement, you could say, "Did you stop loving the rest of us just because you felt crummy? It's the same way with mom (or dad). She is sick and feels awful but she still loves you dearly. She just isn't able to express her love right now."

Kids are amazingly perceptive, so [hiding a mental illness from your kids can backfire](#). However, proactively educating your children can ease their fears and help them become more resilient, understanding and mentally healthier as a result.