

Mental Health – Parents

Your casework with a family in the Permanency Support Program (PSP) may be more successful if you spend time learning about what life is like for the parent with mental health issues. You can do this by:

- learning about the common symptoms related to the parent’s mental health challenge
- learning more about the parent's own experience and story.

Contacting a mental health practitioner for professional advice and support will help you to provide the support a child and parent need. This factsheet will guide your assessment and inform how you think about the experiences of a parent and their children.

Key Facts about Mental Health

- A mental illness is a health problem or disease (mental health disorder) that significantly affects how a person thinks, behaves and interacts with other people.
- It is diagnosed by a qualified healthcare professional according to a standardised criterion set out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V).
- 1 in 5 Australians will experience a mental illness in any given year (Health Direct, 2018).
- Parent mental health challenges are one of three problems most commonly reported to child protection services in NSW (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2010).

Almost half (**45%**) of **Australians will be affected by a mental illness** at some point in their lives. The children and families in PSP you work with are among the groups at higher risk including:

- culturally and linguistically diverse groups (CALD)
- Aboriginal people
- adult survivors of neglect and abuse
- children and young people in out-of-home care
- people in regional, rural or remote areas
- those involved with the criminal justice system

- women who have experienced violence (Mental Health Commission, 2017).

Learn About Common Mental Health Issues

While a parent's diagnosis should not be your only focus, you need to be curious about how a parent's mental health issue might affect their parenting. **Common mental health illnesses** experienced by people who are involved with child protection include:

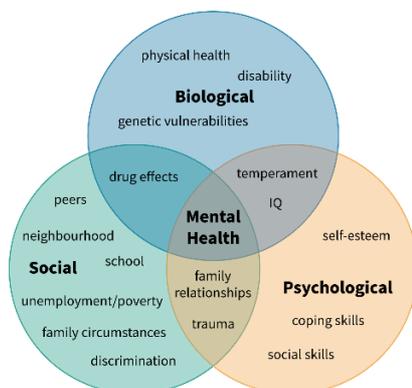
- [anxiety](#)
- [depression](#)
- psychotic disorders including [schizophrenia](#)
- [psychosis](#)
- [bipolar disorder](#)
- [personality disorders](#)
- [antenatal and postnatal anxiety and depression](#)
- [postnatal psychosis](#)

Watch '[Living with a mental disorder](#)' a video from BuzzFeed:

Mental health issues are common, yet often poorly understood. Take this short quiz to find out how much you know [ABC News 'How mental health smart are you?'](#)

Factors Affecting Mental Health

One common way mental health professionals have understood mental health is through the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors, as seen below.



Think about how these issues might be affecting parents and how you, and other people and professionals, can help support them across these different areas. Remember to also consider the broader social system such as their experience of racism, discrimination, oppression and socio-economic disadvantage.

Learning a Parent's Story

The priority in PSP is achieving permanency for a child through a safe and loving home. When assessing what a safe and loving home looks like for a child, add the layer of parent mental illness. Explore with a parent how their mental illness or problem affects their parenting and how they function as a parent.

Some parents experience mental illness only briefly, this might be due to a stressful event or circumstance. For example, a mother suffering postnatal depression in the months after having a baby or a father experiencing anxiety or depression in response to unemployment or a car accident. Other parents may have ongoing mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, chronic anxiety or depression. These parents may need lifelong treatment and support to manage their mental health.

Put yourself in the parent's shoes and ask yourself what life is like for this family. Use this empathy as a foundation for your working relationship. Some parents will not be aware or able to recognise when they are experiencing a mental health issue. If you develop a good relationship with the parent, you are more able to help them understand how their mental health issues are affecting their life, parenting and children. Be curious about their thoughts, feelings and ambitions.

Explore the parent's ability to seek help. Learn about any history of the parent's willingness to work with services. Discuss with them what service/workers they have used before, how helpful they found them and how did the referral come about – self referral, doctor? How did they find the service? If they didn't find the service worked or helped them what is it that didn't work, is there anything that would have made it a better experience?

Find out if the family has any support networks. Is the partner helpful, friends, neighbours, people or groups in the community? Do they ever do anything that's not helpful?

How Mental Health May Affect Parenting

Never assume a parent with mental health concerns is a bad parent. At the same time, always be aware of danger or risk issues for the child.

If you are worried a parent is unable to see the effect of their mental health issues because they seem acutely unwell (for example, delusional, psychotic or suicidal), support them to access a health professional as soon as possible.

Here are some common ways children in PSP can be affected if their parents are mentally unwell:

- their world might be scary and unpredictable
- it can change their behaviour and thoughts
- their relationships with family, friends and other adults can be affected
- they may experience emotional, physical and supervisory neglect
- their learning may suffer
- it can impact their own mental and physical health
- their development can be affected.

Listening with empathy and exploring their world helps a parent feels supported rather than stigmatised, labelled or hopeless. By doing this their guard should start to come down and as they learn to trust you it will be easier to learn how to support them. It is important you learn:

- the factors that may make a child's home life unsafe or at risk
- the parental behaviours that may cause harm to a child
- the parent's strengths in how they cope with parenting
- existing supports that the family has or the need for you to help build supports around the family
- how cultural beliefs about mental health may affect a family and their interaction with you and other supports
- how culture and connection may help parents and children.

See [Talking with Parents Experiencing Mental Health Issues](#) for more information.

Intergenerational Trauma and Parent's Mental Health

Intergenerational trauma can negatively affect families as a result of unresolved emotions and thoughts about a traumatic event or events that is passed on from parents to their children. As a result of trauma, parents in PSP may experience complex biological, psychological and social issues or have untreated or poorly treated substance abuse or mental illness. Trauma can affect how parents feel about themselves and how they relate to others. Parents who have experienced violence, abuse or other trauma have a higher risk of developing a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

If you are worried about a parent's mental health learn about their life experience including any history of violence, oppression and trauma. Challenge yourself to think beyond mental illness to explain a parent's behaviour and seek to understand their cultural experience.

Remember when working with Aboriginal families or families from multicultural backgrounds to learn about and harness their culture and strengths to support children to safely remain at home. Talk with family networks about mental health issues.

Aboriginal people refer to spiritual healing rather than using the term mental health. Child protection problems in PSP continue to be very significant for Aboriginal people reflecting the history of trauma and stressors that have affected parents, parenting skills and communities.

For example, the trauma an Aboriginal father experiences because he was removed from his family and community while he was young, combined with the oppression he has experienced throughout his life may continue to influence his behaviour. As a parent, he keeps his child home from school, thinking he is protecting his child. However, the child feels isolated and is learning they can't trust others. Being removed from normal social activities, his child may feel lonely and worried about being different. Both the parent and child are unlikely to seek help and will be wary of accepting help. Your sensitive, empathic casework skills will be essential in understanding what life is like for this parent and child and how you can help build safety for the child.

Mental Health in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Cultures

Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may view mental health differently to the biomedical that dominates in Australia. In many cultures, religion and spirituality play an important role. For example, in Middle Eastern culture there may be a lack of awareness about mental health, especially depression because the Islamic culture links mental health to religion, a good relationship with God and being active in partaking in religious activities. There is also stigma around mental illness that is associated with disrespect, disgrace and shame. Talking about mental health is taboo and therefore, parents are more likely to keep mental health challenges to themselves (Pocock, 2017 in Naveed, 2018).

Learn about culturally appropriate resources and the way different communities talk about mental health issues. Consult with Aboriginal and multicultural colleagues and learn about culturally appropriate services. This will help you build cultural safety for children so they can remain at or return home.

See the [Healing Foundation](#) and [Supporting CALD communities](#) website for more information. Please also see [Mental Health and Culture](#) and for more information.

Understanding the Feeling of Shame with Mental Health

Parents with mental health may feel shame, embarrassment, guilt and feelings of hopelessness. How you engage with them is important, think about the tools you can use to help them identify their strengths. You might start by exploring what has worked for them in the past and how that could be incorporated into their parenting currently.

In some communities talking about or getting help for mental health issues can cause people to feel shame. For Aboriginal people, these feelings are usually deeply connected to the dispossession of Country and culture. For example, some people might be afraid to go to hospital because being admitted for a mental health issue may have caused shame on their family or community.

It is critical for you to understand the family and community's notion of shame. Without understanding how shame works within a family and community there can be huge barriers to collaborating to keep children safe. Consult with colleagues, families and other services to understand the community's experience of mental health and shame and apply this understanding to your discussions with the family.

Do not make assumptions about what their illness means for them or their children. Let them guide you and let them be the authority for their experience. Make yourself aware of taboo language, topics or behaviours in their community. This does not mean you avoid these conversations completely, especially when it relates to a child's safety, but this understanding will help guide you to decide on the best approach to these discussions.

Please read the factsheets in the Working with Aboriginal Children, Young People and Families and Cultural Care, Identity and Support practice areas for more information about working with Aboriginal and multicultural communities (available in early 2021).

Understand how a Parent Responds and Resists

Whenever people are treated badly, they resist. If someone is abused or faces adversity, they respond in different ways and try to reduce, prevent or stop the abuse. A parent's resistance to this adversity can be misunderstood or even misdiagnosed as a mental illness.

It is useful to think about whether these behaviours might be in response to the world around them and their life experiences. A parent's behaviour may be their way of resisting abuse and keeping hold of or reasserting their dignity. Please see [Dignity Driven Practice](#) for more information.

Uphold the Parent's Dignity at all Times

- show compassion, be respectful, non-judgmental and polite so they feel dignified in sharing with you
- acknowledge grief, sadness, shame, and anger
- look for opportunities that provide hope
- use the parent's language to describe their mental health
- thank a parent for sharing their story
- appreciate their efforts and capacity to look after themselves and their children when not well
- talk about their resistance that you notice helps them move away from feelings of blame and shame
- critically reflect on your own biases and judgements about mental health and parenting.

Where can you find Help for Families?

You can link or refer a parent to the following services:

- Emergency 000 (someone in immediate danger) – call 000
- their GP, psychologist, psychiatrist or other health professional
- [BeyondBlue](#) (anyone feeling depressed or anxious) – call 1300 22 4636 or chat online
- [Black Dog Institute](#) (people affected by mood disorders) – online help
- [PANDA](#) – Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia – call 1300 726 306
- [SANE Australia](#) (people living with a mental illness) – call 1800 187 263
- [Mental Health Line](#) (talk to a mental health professional) – call 1800 011 511
- [Lifeline](#) (anyone having a personal crisis) – call 13 11 14 or chat online
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) (anyone thinking about suicide) – call 1300 659 467
- [Thirrili](#) (Aboriginal community, National Indigenous Critical Response Service, provides emotional and practical support to bereaved families and individuals impacted by suicide or other traumatic loss, 24/7) – call 1800 805 801.

For more helplines, websites and government mental health information, please visit:
<https://mhaustralia.org/need-help>

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