

Talking With Parents Experiencing Mental Health Issues

This should be read in partnership with the **Mental Health - Parents** fact sheet which provides advice and guidance about understanding and working with parents with mental health issues. It's often daunting to start a conversation with a parent about their mental health and how that may be affecting their child or young person. This topic is designed to help you have those hard but necessary conversations.

Language and Mental Health

Language defines your practice, so think about the words you will be using with a family who is experiencing mental health issues. Language can empower, promote hope, and encourage people to change and move forward.

'Language plays a critical role in shaping and reflecting our thoughts, beliefs and feeling.'

The Language We Use and Why

Words can get in the way of your work. For example, when we think and refer to someone as mentally ill, we focus on the illness rather than the person. Focusing on a person's illness can make them feel stigmatised, labelled or hopeless. Always focus on the person first.

There are times when you may need to use terms like mental illness because they are the correct medical and legal term. You will probably need to use them in the formal and administrative parts of your work, for example, a diagnosis of mental illness will be found in court documents.

Ask yourself: How do you talk about mental health with families? What are your experiences and thoughts about mental health? How do these influence your practice? Are you bringing any bias, assumptions or myths into your practice?

Stop using these phrases	Why we don't like them	Use words like this instead
<p>Jan has a ... mental illness, a mental disorder, a mental disease, a mental disability.</p>	<p>These words focus on the illness, not the person. They do not reflect the spectrum of mental health issues and the fact that a person with mental health issues may go through times when they feel well and not so well.</p>	<p>Jan is experiencing mental health issues.</p> <p>Jan has been diagnosed with mental health issues.</p> <p>You may still need to use the term mental illness, especially in formal, medical and legal settings</p>
<p>Matthew is a schizophrenic.</p> <p>Amanda is a depressive.</p>	<p>People are so much more than their diagnosis. These labels can be stigmatising and oppressive.</p>	<p>Put the person first.</p> <p>Matthew has a diagnosis of schizophrenia.</p> <p>Amanda has a diagnosis of depression.</p>
<p>Alicia is non-compliant.</p>	<p>The words 'non-compliant' are judgemental and non-descriptive. The term does not seek to understand why Alicia is reluctant. It implies she will not participate in any treatment, when she may have better ideas about what will work for her.</p>	<p>State what the person has refused to do and the reason why.</p> <p>Alicia is refusing to attend a mental health assessment because she is worried the doctor will just give her a label and not really help.</p>
<p>John is suffering from bipolar.</p>	<p>Living with mental health issues is not always seen as suffering. Everyone has the chance of leading a complete and satisfying life while living with mental health issues.</p>	<p>John has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.</p>

Stop using these phrases	Why we don't like them	Use words like this instead
Taylah is emotional.	Everyone experiences emotions. The term is too broad to be of value.	<p>Talk or write about the emotion the person says they are feeling or record the behaviours that reflect a specific emotion.</p> <p>Taylah became short of breath, was talking fast and loudly, and was crying. This lasted about 10 minutes. She later told me she had a panic attack.</p>
<p>Amanda has a chronic mental illness.</p> <p>Paul is chronic.</p>	These are labels that create a sense of hopelessness. They make recovery seem impossible.	Amanda has lived with mental health issues for 20 years. She has periods of feeling well, sometime for up to 10 months, and periods of feeling unwell, sometimes for periods of up to 6 months. When Amanda is unwell, she finds it hard to...
Words like mad, insane, loony or crazy.	Derogatory and stigmatising terms do little or nothing to describe or inform treatment.	Ian is experiencing mental health issues.

Source: Adapted from the [Clinical Support Tool Guide to Appropriate Language in Mental Health Service](#), NSW Health Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Network, 2011

‘A better life for people living with mental illness means no stigma, having friends, being part of something and looking forward’.

[NSW Mental Health Commission](#)

Conversation Tips for Talking to Parents About Their Mental Health

- **Find the right time and place.** Consider where and when your conversation will take place so that there are no interruptions or other pressures. Sometimes it's easier to talk with little eye contact, so you may want to walk or do an activity together while you talk.
- **Talk openly about mental health.** Talk about ways to help them feel better including getting support, taking medication, eating and sleeping well and having social connections, and let them know there are other people who may experience the same struggles.
- **Let them know they are not alone.** Remind parents you are there to support and help them. Let them know about other people who can support them.
- **Talk about safety.** If you are worried, clearly and gently state your worries and why you feel this way. Develop a safety plan together.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Be aware of personal space and take note of how the parent reacts to what you do. Remember the parent may have experienced past trauma.
- **Validate their feelings and experiences.** Do not minimise experiences and help them to name feelings. Use their language.
- **Be mindful of your own reactions.** Be calm. Do not respond with anger, shock or judgement as this may mean the parent will not want to keep talking to you.
- **Avoid the temptation to give advice or lecture.** Avoid questions that will result in a yes or no answer but try not to overwhelm the parent with a lot of complex information.

Talking to Parents and Carers About Their Child's Mental Health

Parents are likely to have a variety of reactions when talking about their child's mental health issues for the first time.

Reactions parents may have, include:

- **Denial** — especially if they thought that what was happening for their child was just the ups and downs of everyday life.
- **Relief** — if they have been worried about their child for some time, and they feel like they are hopeful that their child can gain some support.
- **Anger** — why is this happening in my family?
- **Guilt** — if they have the same mental health condition or are worried about the child's experiences contributing to their mental health issues.
- **Fear** — what does the future hold for my child?
- **Minimisation**— it's not that bad, I had to cope with far worse.

Practice considerations	Conversation ideas
Talk to parents about what worries they have for their kids.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sorts of things have you noticed that worry you? • When did you first start to notice this? • What are you most worried about for your child? • What do you think is going well for your child? • How do you think you can best support your child at the moment? • What information do you need so you can help your child with their worries?
Encourage parents to seek help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many young people who need help and support with their mental health. The best place to start is often the General Practitioner (GP). How would you feel about going with your child to the doctor? • What do you think would worry your child about getting help and how could you help them to feel better about that?
Talk to parents about how their own history of mental health issues are related to their child's.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although genetics is a factor in mental health issues, there are many other factors that also play a part. • What helped you feel better when you were your child's age? • What have you learned about looking after your own mental health that you could share with your child?
Encourage parents to look after themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking after a child with a mental health issue can be hard. What things can you do for yourself to make sure you stay well enough to support your child?

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

Also see: [Mental Health – Parents](#) and [Mental Health – Working with Children and Young People in PSP.](#)

References:

New South Wales Mental Health Commission (2017). The Lived Experience. Available: <https://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/mental-health-and/the-lived-experience>