

Talking with Your Children about Your Mental Health or Addiction Issues

Talking with your children about your mental health or addiction issues can help them make sense of changes they see in you and the family and whānau. Without your support, your children will try to make sense of these changes on their own. Talking with them will reduce their confusion.

You need to tell them enough to reduce their concerns about your issues and how you are being supported – and they need to know that they aren't to blame.

You might be worried that talking about your issues with your children will burden them. In fact, many parents say that their children are reassured to learn about why things might be 'different' and that their parents are taking steps to manage the issues.

Be prepared

It is important to think ahead about what you will tell your children about your issues. Think about how old they are and what sort of things they will understand.

Also, think about what you know about your issues. When you and other family and whānau understand mental health and addiction issues, and the types of support and treatments that are available, you'll be more comfortable talking about them with your child. You can research this yourself or ask your health workers for information.

The internet has a lot of information about mental health and addiction issues. Some of this information is not very helpful or correct. If you're not sure if the information you find is true, discuss it with your health workers or support people before sharing it with your children.

What children know

Children are very observant and are usually able to discuss changes to do with their parent's mental health or addiction issues (despite well-meaning efforts to keep them hidden). Try thinking about what your child might notice about what is happening for you.

Children also have very active imaginations and often think things are worse than they really are. And they tend to blame themselves and may feel responsible for what their parents do. This is why it's so important to tell your children about what is really going on.

How to start

It can help your children if you 'normalise' the issues. You can do this by referring to another friend or family member they know who has a similar issue, or someone they know from TV or sports (eg, John Kirwan's depression campaign).

Explain that mental health and addiction issues are common – one in four people have a mental health problem – but people don't always like to talk about them.

You might explain your situation by comparing it with breaking a leg or having a physical illness – your mind can also be unwell or 'broken' for a while. You might ask your children if they've noticed any unusual behaviour and then explain why it is happening.

You can talk about how these issues might affect them and others in the family and whānau.

Practical tips

Avoid keeping mental health and addiction issues a 'secret'.

Keep your first discussion simple.

Just one talk is not enough. Children will have questions, and these will change over time.

Talk to your children about recovery; tell them that people can manage these issues and live really good lives.

Encourage your children to talk about what they notice and understand about your symptoms and behaviours.

Ask them what they understand about the words they use to describe mental health and addiction issues. Children often use words they've heard but don't understand.

Give correct, basic information that your children can understand. Don't support any wrong 'explanations' they may have made up or heard from others. For example, 'drug education' at school may be useful but can also make your children worry about things that aren't part of your experience.

Ask your children about their fears or worries and make practical plans to try to reduce these.

Make it clear that the problem isn't your children's fault and it's not their responsibility to make you better.

Some children like to help. If so, you can suggest small things they can do when you're unwell, like tidying up their toys or drawing a picture for you.

Point your children to the information on our website for children who have a parent with a mental health or addiction issue (www.werrycentre.org.nz). Your mental health clinician might be able to recommend books or movies that could also help you discuss these issues.

Foster an open relationship

Encourage your children to talk with trusted, supportive friends and family and whānau about what is going on. It's important to have an open and safe relationship with your children that enables them to ask all the 'scary', worst-case questions when they need to. Making them feel safe so they'll ask these questions and express their feelings is good for their development and wellbeing.

Recovery and self-care

It's important to look after yourself and seek help when needed as this will reassure your children. Also, children see and copy choices their parents make. When you look after yourself, you're teaching your children to care for their own mental and physical health, too.