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HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILDREN?

A Guide to Parents who have Mental Health Problems

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Dear parent,

Parents who have psychological difficulties often worry about their children. Parenting may not work out like before. Tiredness may rob parents of strength and patience. They may also wonder how their children perceive their illness and how it affects them.

Parents may also have noticed changes in their children, and indeed, children may have difficulties. Some children may become withdrawn, some restless and grumpy, others may worry excessively and yet others may be unable to complete their homework. Furthermore, some children might seclude themselves at home. A toddler might cling to the parent, whereas a teenager might prefer to stay away from home as much as possible. No wonder if parents are at a loss and feel helpless. Children's problems are the main reason for worry and fear for many parents.

NOT ALL CHILDREN DEVELOP PROBLEMS; AND EVEN IF THEY DO, IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT THEY'LL HAVE A PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS LATER ON. NORMAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IS POSSIBLE EVEN WHEN A PARENT IS ILL. THERE ARE DIFFICULT PERIODS IN THE LIFE OF EVERY CHILD AND EVERY FAMILY; IT IS THE NORMAL COURSE OF LIFE. THE CRITICAL QUESTION IS HOW EACH FAMILY COPES WITH AND RESOLVES DIFFICULTIES. THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE IS TO HELP PARENTS TO FIND A WAY TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN.

This guide book uses the following terms in parallel: psychiatric illness, disturbance, problems and difficulties: the terminology is not important. Concepts to be presented here can be discussed in all kinds of families. The word "children" defines all persons who are under-age, including youth.

HOW DO PARENTS' PSYCHIATRIC PROBLEMS AFFECT THEIR CHILD?

Depending on the type of disturbance, parents who suffer from psychological problems feel, think and act differently than healthy parents. The difficulties may be revealed in facial expressions, gestures, thought processes and speech, as well as in the frequency of smiling and the type and extent of activity. Things which confuse or even frighten the child may take place at home.

Usually parent's problems are not explained to the children because it is thought that talking about them would increase children's burden. Nevertheless, children form their own ideas about the events they witness, and if they don't have correct information, misconceptions occur easily. For instance, a child might believe the sick parent's delusions to be real. Unwillingness of a tired, clinically depressed parent to participate in the family's activities may be construed as lack of caring; my spouse is no more interested in me, my mom does not want to be with me, my daddy does not like me.

Children try to find reasons for parents' problems, usually blaming themselves: Does my mother feel bad because I was disobedient? If I had behaved better, mother would be like before. Did I do something that caused father to say strange things? Mother stayed up all night, probably because of my poor report card. I am so worthless that father said that he doesn't want to live any longer. – Because children blame themselves, they believe that they are bad and carry a heavy burden of guilt. It will be a relief for them to know the real reason for their parents' problems.

WHEN PROBLEMS THAT AFFECT EVERYONE ARE NOT TALKED ABOUT, FAMILY MEMBERS BECOME ESTRANGED FROM EACH OTHER. RELATIONSHIPS MAY BECOME GUARDED (LIKE 'WALKING ON EGG SHELLS'), CHARACTERIZED BY SUSPICION, IMPATIENCE AND IRRITABILITY. IN CONTRAST, MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING GENERATES CLOSENESS AND TRUST, EVEN IF CIRCUMSTANCES WERE VERY DIFFICULT.

QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED BY PARENTS.

Will my child have a psychiatric illness in the future?

The causes of psychiatric disturbances are manifold and it is impossible to know who of us will get sick. The following factors may predispose a person to mental illness: genes, the person's own mental makeup, life history, current relationships and life situations, all of them playing a role. If psychiatric disturbances have occurred in many previous generations of the family, it could indicate inheritance of a tendency to react to life's difficulties in a certain way. Even in that case, only the combination of many factors triggers psychiatric illness. Are the life experiences of a child the same as those of the parent? Never, thus the starting point for the child is different from that of the parent.

IF THERE IS A TENDENCY TO PSYCHIATRIC DISTURBANCES IN THE FAMILY, IT IS GOOD TO BE AWARE OF IT AND SENSITIVELY OBSERVE THE CHILD TO DETERMINE WHETHER S/HE SHOWS SIMILAR REACTION PATTERNS. IF MANY RELATIVES SUFFER FROM CLINICAL DEPRESSION, AND IF YOUR CHILD TENDS TO REACT TO DIFFICULTIES BY WITHDRAWAL AND FEELING DOWN, YOU CAN TACTFULLY ENCOURAGE THE CHILD TO SPEAK ABOUT HIS/HER CONCERNS AND SEEK THE COMPANY OF OTHER PEOPLE DURING DIFFICULT TIMES. JUST BEING AWARE OF CHANGES IN THE CHILD'S BEHAVIOR MAY HELP THE PARENT TO NOTICE DIFFICULTIES EARLY ON AND GET HELP AS PROMPTLY AS POSSIBLE.

Does my child need professional help?

If the child's personality appears to have changed in a negative way, it is appropriate to seek advice from a professional, who may determine whether the child needs help. For example, the child may appear to be most of the time depressed, fearful or moody, has sleeping difficulties, behaves badly, starts isolating him/herself at home, has anger outbursts, performs poorly at school or perhaps stays away from home as much as possible. The child might also have strange behaviors, follow certain rituals or talk about disturbing thoughts. Where to find a professional may depend on your area of residence. Usually the best first step is to ask the mental health

clinician who treats you, or child's pediatrician. They are usually familiar with available resources. These may include a health care center, child guidance clinic or social service agency. They may also provide you with advice in child upbringing, because parenting a child with mental health problems is difficult.

If you are so concerned about your child's mental health that you watch him/her constantly, it is best to consult a professional. Children are very sensitive and may become quite anxious if they feel that they are watched all the time.

IT IS NECESSARY TO SEEK HELP IMMEDIATELY WHEN THE CHILD IS IN DANGER OF GETTING HURT. LOOK FOR HELP IF A CHILD OR AN ADOLESCENT TALKS ABOUT OR THREATENS WITH SUICIDE, OR WHEN THE CHILD'S THOUGHTS, DRAWINGS OR CONVERSATIONS DEAL EXCESSIVELY WITH DEATH OR WHEN S/HE DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE ABOUT DANGER, FOR INSTANCE IN TRAFFIC. SOMETIMES IT MAY APPEAR THAT THE CHILD IS ONLY SEEKING ATTENTION BY SUCH BEHAVIORS OR THREATS. THAT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE. YOU WOULD NOT EXPOSE YOUR CHILD TO THE DANGER OF DEATH IN ANY OTHER SITUATION EITHER, LIKE LETTING HIM/HER DO A BALANCING ACT ON THE ROOF RIDGE OR WALK ON THIN ICE, EVEN IF IT WAS DONE JUST FOR DEFIANCE OR FOR TRYING TO GET ATTENTION.

Have I ruined my child's chances in life?

One of the most painful experiences of parenting is the realization that one has made the life of one's children more difficult. The feelings of guilt and depression may be so strong that they are difficult to manage. But even though your children and family may have difficulties, you have not intentionally caused them.

You are not responsible for your illness any more than patients with heart disease or fever are responsible for theirs. Nobody blames a patient with a heart disease for having to stay in a hospital for a long time, being bedridden at home and unable to care for the household or to participate in parent/teacher meetings. Why then does a patient with mental health disturbance feel so guilty for having problems? Because even now it is the prevailing opinion that psychiatric

disturbances are caused by patients themselves, which stigmatizes them as bad human beings. Such beliefs are not true, of course, but they remain deep in our subconscious.

SECOND, IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT CHILDREN CAN GROW AND DEVELOP NORMALLY EVEN IN FAMILIES WHERE PARENTS HAVE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS. YOUR CHILDREN'S OPPORTUNITIES HAVE NOT BEEN LOST EVEN WHEN THEY SHOW SIGNS OF A PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS; TREATMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH HAS BEEN SHOWN TO BE EFFECTIVE. FURTHERMORE, DIFFICULTIES ARE PART OF EVERYBODY'S LIFE. YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE THAWRTED BY DIFFICULTIES IN FAMILY, UNLESS NO ATTEMPT IS MADE TO RESOLVE THEM. RECOGNIZING AND RESOLVING DIFFICULTIES AS A FAMILY SUPPORTS CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT AND EQUIPS HIM/HER WITH MANY LIFE SKILLS THAT WILL BE USEFUL IN THE FUTURE.

Are children responsible for their parent's problems?

Almost all children – and even some parents – think that children are culpable for the parent's mental health problems. Why? Because children can be very demanding, and because parent's symptoms will inevitably become a factor in the child/parent interaction.

For instance, let's talk about irritability, which is a symptom of many mental health disturbances. The parent loses temper at the slightest provocation and is angry when things don't work out his/her way. However, children cause all kinds of annoyances: They spill a glass of milk, leave their shoes in the middle of an entrance hall, don't obey and bring reprimands from school. Then the parent loses it and flies off the handle, or possibly bursts into tears (I can't take this any more!) and may withdraw into his/her own room. Both the child and the parent believe then, that the child was responsible for parent's hurt feelings. Even though the child did spill the glass of milk, he/she is not responsible for the parent's excessive reaction. It was caused by the parent's own mental state.

What if the child's problems were great enough to overburden the parent's strength? For instance, a small child's sleeping difficulties, a child's severe psychiatric disturbances or older children's alcohol/illegal drug abuse could be such problems. But what if the parent's strength would not be sufficient to deal with his/her child's serious physical ailment: would the child be blamed then? Of course not.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN THOSE SITUATIONS? FIRST IT IS NECESSARY TO RECOGNIZE HOW ONE'S OWN SYMPTOMS COME OUT DURING INTERACTION WITH OTHER PEOPLE. IF IRRITABILITY IS YOUR SPECIAL PROBLEM, TELL THE CHILD, THAT YOU BLOW YOUR FUSE EASILY EVEN IF YOU DON'T WANT TO, BUT THAT YOU ARE GETTING HELP FOR IT. AND IF THE SITUATION OCCURS AGAIN WHILE YOU CAN'T CONTROL YOURSELF, TALK TO THE CHILD AFTERWARD. ASK IF S/HE REMEMBERS, WHAT YOU TOLD HIM/HER EARLIER – AND ALSO THAT YOU ARE SORRY IT HAPPENED AGAIN, BUT THAT THE CHILD WAS NOT AT FAULT.

What to do when housekeeping falls on the wayside?

When the parent's energy level is low, household chores tend to fall on the wayside. Mother in particular feels guilty about this and blames herself. Instead of self-accusations it is worthwhile to discuss with others how to arrange the care of the household. Similar household problems also arise if the parent breaks a leg. Then too it is best to negotiate openly how to take care of things.

Sometimes it happens that one of the children will take on all the household chores. S/he might even manage the household in an exemplary way, including the care of younger siblings. However, it behooves parents to consider whether such a burden is too heavy for the child. If the child must give up hobbies and the company of friends, the burden is too large. Such an arrangement could also distort the relationships between siblings. An adult should take charge of the situation even if the child insists that s/he can manage. Children cannot assess their own strength or the long-term effects of situations even in adolescence.

SHALL WE WAKE UP IN THE MORNING, GO TO BED AT A REASONABLE HOUR, DO WE HAVE FOOD AND CLEAN CLOTHES? SUCH ORDINARY PROBLEMS FACTOR INTO THE CHILD'S FEELINGS OF SAFETY, THUS THESE ISSUES ARE NOT PURELY PRACTICAL ONES. IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO DIVIDE THE HOUSE WORK BETWEEN THE FAMILY MEMBERS, IN ORDER NOT TO OVERBURDEN ANYONE. IF THE FAMILY CANNOT MANAGE ALONE, ASK FOR HELP FROM FRIENDS, RELATIVES OR SOCIAL SERVICES AVAILABLE IN YOUR AREA. ALSO PRAISE THE CHILDREN FOR THE WORK THEY HAVE DONE.

Will foster care be necessary?

Years ago, placing children in a foster care was the only means of help available for families that could not care for their children due to a parent's mental disorder. Fortunately the situation has changed. Currently the main goal of social work is to help maintain the family through provision of support in everyday life by many different means. However, sometimes it is necessary to find a foster home, for instance when a single parent is hospitalized and no other care for children is available. If possible, such a situation should be anticipated and optimally the arrangement for child's care should be made by the parents themselves, if possible. It is easier for children, when they know in advance that you have planned for their care in the case you could not provide it yourself.

Placement of children away from home is also appropriate when children are exposed to neglect or when they witness violence that threatens their care and safety. Obviously, it is damaging for children to be either the target of violence or to live in a threatening atmosphere and witness violence between people around them. In these situations it would be best if parents themselves would take the initiative of finding a safe place for their children.

Sometimes a parent who has a mental disorder may have feelings of resentment toward one of the children, even reject that child or be unable to stop from being mean to the child. In such situations the child may feel hurt, become depressed, aggressive, or show other behavioral and emotional problems. If you notice that you develop such feelings, seek help from a professional, such as mental health clinician, a family counseling clinic or child welfare agency.

A SOCIAL WORKER IS A GOOD PARTNER TO COLLABORATE WITH. DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE SITUATION AT HOME COLLAPSES; CONTACT SOCIAL SERVICES AS SOON AS YOU START WORRYING ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN OR ABOUT YOUR OWN CAPABILITY AS A PARENT. IT BEHOOVES YOU TO NEGOTIATE AND DISCUSS TOGETHER WITH THE SOCIAL WORKER AS TO WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT WOULD BE MOST BENEFICIAL TO YOUR FAMILY. DEPENDING UPON SERVICES AVAILABLE IN YOUR AREA ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MIGHT BE PROVIDED: HOME HELP, INTENSIVE FAMILY THERAPY, SUPPORT/THERAPY FOR THE CHILD AT SCHOOL, OR A TEMPORARY PLACEMENT OUTSIDE THE HOME, SUCH AS WITH FRIENDS, RELATIVES, OR A FOSTER FAMILY. TALK ABOUT THE SITUATION WITH YOUR FRIENDS! TIREDNESS IS FAMILIAR TO MANY, AND YOU MIGHT PROFIT FROM OTHERS' VALUABLE IDEAS AND EXPERIENCE AS WELL AS FROM THE PRACTICAL HELP THEY MIGHT PROVIDE.

WHAT CAN A PARENT DO?

When a family has difficulties, the children need their parents' attention and support. However, the children's and parents' needs are often contradictory: the child needs closeness and the adult needs time to be alone in peace. In addition, the children's needs may manifest in ways that irritate the parent – for example clinging. Then any parent may snap: “Go away and leave me alone!” Rejection will make the child feel worse. Consider rather something like this: “I would love to be with you, but I feel so bad now, that it would be better for me to stay alone.”

It is particularly difficult to agree about ground rules when the parent's strength is declining. It would be important not to set limits that reflect either seeming indifference or cruel discipline, although such practices are not unusual. If the atmosphere at home is continually tense and the rules are repeatedly disputed, look for help at a family guidance clinic. Talk about this with your friends also; you might get from them good tips which are useful in everyday situations.

CHILDREN ARE DELIGHTED BY EVEN THE SMALLEST OF GESTURES: A HUG, A FRIENDLY WORD AND A THANK YOU MEANS A LOT TO THEM. TRY TO BE SENSITIVE TO CHILDREN'S REACTIONS AND RESPECT THEM. OLDER SCHOOL

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS MAY EXPERIENCE HUGGING AND TOUCHING AS TOO INTRUSIVE. THEN IT IS APPROPRIATE TO SHOW TENDERNESS IN A DIFFERENT WAY, LIKE PUTTING A NOTE ON THE TABLE TO WELCOME THE CHILD RETURNING FROM SCHOOL WHEN YOU CANNOT BE THERE IN PERSON.

Help the child to learn about the parent's illness.

Get to know yourself and work together with your spouse.

- Think of your own symptoms; perhaps make a list of them, whatever they might be: tiredness, paranoid thoughts, too rapid a pace, apathy, fears, mixed-up speech, compulsive behaviors.
- Include the other parent in these discussions, if possible. It is important for you because when parents' work together, children feel safe.
- Analyze whether you support each other in the parental role or do you pull in different directions?

Consider the situation from the child's point of view.

- Think of the way your symptoms appear when you are together with children: "Do I anger easily, do I force my child to follow my own rituals, and do I warn him/her about neighbors without cause?"
- Think how children have understood the situations and how they have reacted. Matt begins to run wild, Mary withdraws to her room. Lena becomes anxious and tries to help. Jack goes away and stays out the whole evening.
- Which problem appears to be most difficult or important for the children? Prioritize the problems, for instance this way: the worst is that I anger so easily, the second that we, the parents, quarrel so much, and third, that I have no patience to listen to the children.
- Choose one of the problems, maybe the one that is the most topical to the children, or the one that is the easiest to handle. Consider how to explain it to the children. Leave the other problems for later on.

- Tell children that you are receiving medical care. It increases children's feeling of safety and trust toward the parent, because then they do not need to think that the parent's well-being is up to them.
- Tell them also about medicines which you take; children might have many fears and misconceptions about medications.

Talk with your children.

- Conversations with children may take place when the family is involved in common chores or when children are either drawing or playing. You can start by reminding the child about some recent event that was connected with your difficulties. "You have probably noticed that I am different than before---. I would like to talk about that---. Even yesterday things went wrong---". Ask how the child felt about it and what s/he thought.
- It is important to start discussions with children by listening. Let the child have time to talk. Do not interrupt and say that it was not like that at all. Rather, ask the child to continue. It is common, that children form their own theories, and it is good for you to know about them. Then it is easier to decide how to respond to the child.
- Sometimes children remain very quiet or say that they have nothing to talk about. They might be afraid of hurting their parents. Ask if that is the case? Sometimes children want only to listen. You can also give them printed material about mental illness, designed for children, and use it as a starting point of discussion.
- Don't give up! One discussion will not change everything and even if one discussion fails, it does not lead to a catastrophe. If your family is not used to talking things over, such matters can be learned by all parties. Often discussions with children are short, but their meaning is important. One learns to understand the family situation gradually, via many small chats and spending time together. Child's age is also an important factor – when the child grows up, understanding increases. Psychiatric disturbances should be ONE among many other important subjects of discussions. Progress will be evident only gradually.

THE PURPOSE OF CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN IS TO HELP THEM TO UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES, THEIR PARENTS AND THE FAMILY

SITUATION. IN THIS WAY CLOSENESS BETWEEN THE CHILD AND PARENT INCREASES AND DISTANCE CAUSED BY INSECURITY AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS DECREASES. THE PURPOSE IS NOT TO ENCOURAGE THE PARENT TO TELL ALL HIS/HER LIFE EXPERIENCES AND PROBLEMS TO THE CHILD. THE CHILD SHOULD NOT BE MADE INTO A PARTY OF THE PARENT'S ILLNESS. THERE ARE ADULTS FOR THAT PURPOSE.

Try to find a supportive adult for the child and diminish family's isolation.

It is important for the child to have an adult person, with whom s/he can talk about family matters. That adult can be a friend of the family, a relative or a professional, such as a school nurse, counselor or school psychologist. In some areas of the country social service or volunteer offices might be able to find such a person for the child. It would be also very important that other persons, like day-care workers or teachers, who deal with the child on everyday basis, would be aware of the home situation.

Parents often wish that family matters would not be discussed outside the home. One must weigh the child's best interests against the shame that parents feel. Usually there is no reason to feel ashamed and parents will be surprised when they realize how sympathetic other people really are.

Sometimes children tell about family matters to their friend, to the friend's mother or perhaps to a teacher, although parents have told them not to. That might have been a survival tactic for the child. Instead of making a big fuss about it, understand your child.

Support your child's friendships and interests

When problems occur at home, outside activities will bring the child joy, develop his/her social skills and provide necessary support. When parents experience difficulties, children may abandon their own activities. There are many reasons for that: the child's strength declines, s/he concentrates on helping at home, doesn't dare to leave the parent alone because the parent might be in danger or the child might feel that having fun is forbidden. Not being able to talk about matters at home raises a wall between friends.

Consider how you can support your child's friendships, interests and other activities. Sometimes children need "permission" from their parent. The parent must say outright, that the child can go out and have a good time; and that even if the parent is in bad shape, there are other people to help and care for him/her. If driving the child to a friend's house is out of the question, try to find out if somebody else could help?

Sometimes a parent is in such a bad shape that s/he does not want the child to bring a friend home. Talk also about that with the child and tell why it is so. State clearly that the reason is because of your own strength, not because you don't want the child to meet friends. Put your heads together as to what other arrangements could be made. Would it be possible that the child brings a friend home when you are away and another adult is at home?

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE

A parent's mental illness is not the end of the world for the family, although initially it can darken the whole outlook. Although difficulties may occur, in most cases they can be ironed out and children can be helped and supported. One can also consider difficulties as a challenge for personal growth. Children, when supported by persons close to them, may develop better social skills, have more empathy, responsibility and creativity and also be able to manage in unforeseen situations better than children whose life has been easier. Difficulties are not an obstacle for the child's development, providing that they are confronted and dealt courageously.

From the author:

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