



Parenting with a Mental Illness: Positive Parenting & Child Resilience

Children, Mental Illness and Resilience

Evidence shows that children are often very resilient when faced with adversity, such as having a parent with a mental illness. Resilience in children is defined as the likelihood that a child will succeed, even when faced with a risky or harmful situation.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are personal characteristics that increase resilience and reduce the chances that a child will develop emotional or behavioral problems in response to a difficult situation. Though your child has characteristics that you may be unable to change (for example, their genetic makeup and temperament), all children have protective factors that you as a parent can foster.

Protective Factors that increase resilience include:

- Knowledge that the parent is ill and that the child is not to blame
- Parents' willingness to get treatment for their illness
- Help and support from family members
- A stable home environment
- Psychotherapy for the child and parent
- A sense of being loved by the ill parent
- Positive self-esteem and a sense of competence
- Inner strength and good coping skills in the child
- Strong relationships with healthy adults
- Friendships and positive peer relationships
- Interest in and success at school
- Healthy interests and talents outside the home
- Help from outside the family to improve the family environment
- Good physical health and positive body image
- Positive experiences with spirituality and religion

What Can I Do as a Parent?

1. Talk openly to your child about your mental illness in an age-appropriate manner. Make sure your child knows that he/she is not to blame for your illness. Listen to your child's concerns and give your child ample opportunity to express his/her feelings. Make clear to your child that you are seeking treatment and working towards recovery. For tips on how to discuss your mental illness with your child, go to www.mhasp.org/coping/guardians.html.

2. Help your child with homework and encourage them in school. Get to know teachers, be involved in your child's school and monitor your child's attendance. A strong educational foundation and increased parent involvement in education leads to better health for your child.

3. Encourage extra-curricular activities for your child. Foster their talents. This will help to increase your child's self-esteem.

4. Develop a network of friends and family that you and your child can rely on. Allowing friends and family to help with some activities, such as housework and transportation, will give you and your child more time to seek treatment or spend time together. If you are part of a religious organization, encourage your child to become involved in the religious community and to develop his or her sense of spirituality.

5. Take a parenting skills course or attend a parenting support group. Studies show that self-help groups and support groups can speed your recovery. Your local Mental Health Association can direct you to groups for parents with mental illnesses. Even if there is not a group specifically designed for parents, attending a self-help or support group on mental illness can be very beneficial.

6. Promote positive experiences with your child. Take time to play with your child. Participate in activities together to stay connected as a family. These experiences will strengthen family relationships and help your child to weather the difficult times. As much as possible, avoid exposing children to hostility between yourself and your partner or others.

7. Formulate a child-care plan, advance directives and/or a wellness plan in the event that you need to be hospitalized. As a parent, you should create a child care plan that specifies the names and contact information of people who have agreed to care for your child/ren in the event of an emergency. Go over these plans with your child, especially the child care plan, so that your child/ren know what to expect in the event of an acute episode of your illness. Learn more about care planning by using the resources listed at the end.

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What Can I Do as a Parent? (continued)

8. Encourage your child to develop healthy friendships of his/her own. Welcome your child's friends in your home and teach your child how to nurture these relationships.

9. If necessary, encourage your child to talk to a psychotherapist or include him or her in your psychotherapy. This will give your child an opportunity to express his fears and concerns related to your mental illness, and will give him a non-judgmental environment in which to seek support.

10. Remember, first and foremost, that you are the parent, and that your child needs you to be the primary caregiver. Do not force your child to take on a care-giving role for which he or she is not prepared.

Special Considerations for Adolescents

Children who are realistic about their parent's illness, who can articulate strategies to offset its impact on their own lives, and who believe that their actions make a difference, are more likely to be resilient. Once children reach adolescence, they are more able to address a parent's mental illness in depth. Their capacity for reflection and self-understanding is greater. They may develop a fear of getting sick with a mental illness themselves. They may also have a fear of being shamed or distanced by their peers due to the stigma of their parent's mental illness. Some ways that you can protect your adolescent from susceptibility to mental illness are:

- Help adolescents develop and maintain relationships with friends, family and care-giving adults. Be sensitive to how easily embarrassed teens are in front of their peers and avoid being around their friends when you are having acute difficulties.
- Help them be successful in school and in the community.
- Talk openly about their concerns of developing a mental illness themselves and help them to get information about mental illness.
- Help develop understanding about what they have experienced in the family and obtain support for them outside the home if needed.

Conclusion

There is a risk that a child can experience an emotional or behavioral problem as a result of his parent's mental illness. But this risk is substantially greater when the mental illness is accompanied by other negative events and circumstances. A parent's mental illness alone is not a predictor of childhood mental illness. When parents are proactive in building their child's protective resources, there is a strong likelihood that the child will grow up healthy and show resilience in the face of adversity.

RESOURCES

UPenn Collaborative on Community Integration. "Parenting with a Mental Illness: Child Welfare & Custody Issues." At www.upennrrtc.org/issues/ChildWelfareCustodyFS.pdf

Beardslee, W.R., "Out of the Darkened Room—When a Parent is Depressed," Little, Brown and Co. (Boston, 2002).

"Children of Parents with Mental Illness," www.familyresource.com/health/

Fudge, E., Falkov, A., Kowalenko, N., and Robinson, P., "Parenting is a Mental Health Issue," Australian Psychiatry, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 2004.

Hammen, C., and Brennan, P., "Severity, Chronicity and Timing of Maternal Depression and Risk for Adolescent Offspring Diagnoses in a Community Sample," Archives of General Psychiatry, Vol. 60, No. 3 (March, 2003).

MHASP/TEC Family Center Coping Website, www.mhasp.org/coping.

NMHA Strengthening Families Fact Sheet—"Tips on Healthy Parenting for Mothers with Depression," www.nmha.org

NMHA Strengthening Families Fact Sheet—"When a Parent Has a Mental Illness- From Risk to Resiliency: Protective Factors for Children," www.nmha.org

Sleek, S., "Better Parenting May Not Be Enough for Some Children", APA Monitor, Vol. 29, No. 11, November 1998.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) publication on Parents with Mental Illness and their Families: <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/KEN-01-0109/default.asp>

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Counseling Center Fact Sheet—"When Your Parent Has a Mental Illness," www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/parents.htm

