Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Talking to your kids at any age about your mental health



Your family can likely sense your anger, sadness, and other emotions despite your best efforts to mask them. Though uncomfortable at times, talking to your kids about your mental health can reduce anxiety, clear up misconceptions, and cut through the confusion.

Further, you also have the opportunity to provide accurate information, reduce stigma and reassure your family that mental illness is treatable.

Discussing mental illness with your children

How you talk to your kids about mental health concerns depends on their ages as well as your own knowledge about the topic. You may need to do your own research to ensure that you are well-informed and able to discuss it in a meaningful, age-appropriate manner.

Preschoolers – Just as you wouldn't go into great detail about the male and female reproductive systems when discussing where babies come from with preschoolers, the same is true when discussing mental illness. Younger children aren't ready for detailed information but they are likely to be aware of another person's emotional outbursts, changed appearance or unusual behaviors. Keep your answers brief and matter-of-fact and try not to over-inform.

School-age children – Older children will likely need more information and ask more questions. They may feel uncomfortable in the presence of an emotional person or unsafe with someone suffering from a mental illness. If a parent has a mental illness, reassure the child that it is an illness and no one, particularly the child, is to blame. The time for this discussion is when your child feels comfortable and safe. Answer questions honestly and in a straightforward manner. Depending on your child's age and maturity, a few questions and answers may be all that is needed to put him or her at ease.

Teenagers – Teenagers may already have misconceptions about mental illness due to discussions with their peers and stereotypes perpetuated by mass media. They may have tougher questions than their younger siblings, but can handle more information. Allow the teen to ask questions, share concerns, and contribute to the discussion. Remember that when talking with teenagers, they tend to be more receptive to two-way conversations than lectures.

Whatever the age, accurate information and a straightforward manner can set the stage for your child's understanding of mental illness and compassion for those affected. Encourage questions and work to "normalize" mental illness. Open discussions and information about mental health issues can build resiliency, reduce stigma and minimize feelings of shame.

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