



Providing Care to Parents with Mental Health Issues

What should you consider in providing Care?

1. Inquire whether your patient has children.*
2. Discuss strategies to learn more about their mental illness and positive parenting.*
3. Ask patient to invite others- their partner, spouse or close friend to treatment visits.*
4. Refer patient to a trained counsellor or mental health specialist*.
5. Encourage patient and their support system to develop an advanced plan of care for children, should the patient become ill (Ulysses Agreement).*

* More information on the back of this sheet

Why Pay Attention to the Parenting?

- ✓ Patients with mental illness parent at the same rate as the general population.
- ✓ Their children are at greater risk for developing mental health problems.
- ✓ Patient's parenting capacity may be diminished which impacts child's mental health and emotional development (in severe or mild syndromes alike).
- ✓ Effective early intervention improves outcomes for children and parents
- ✓ These patients want to be good parents but stigma prevents many parenting patients from seeking help they need.

Succeeding at parenting is as important to patients with mental health issues as it is to anyone else. A basic principle of parenting is that people will often do for their kids what they might not for themselves. If their parental concerns for their children are sensitively discussed, typically patients will have greater motivation for treatment compliance because of the positive effects for their children.

Like most parents they are anxious to do and be seen to be doing a competent job as parents. Unfortunately it can also lead to minimization and concealing concerns. Hiding the problem seldom helps it and can add to patient's stress.

What are the Impacts of Mental Illness on Parenting?

- ✓ May cloud the patient's ability to see that their illness can affect their parenting.
- ✓ Decreases attentiveness and attunement to their children, affecting attachment
- ✓ May affect the ability to provide basic care
- ✓ Leads to absence (in the case of hospitalization), repeated parent/child separations and family instability
- ✓ Decreases self esteem as mental health issues carry a powerful stigma.
- ✓ Leads to fears of transmitting the illness

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1. **Inquire whether your patient has children.**

Inquiring about a patient's life, recovery motivators, strengths and possible stressors promotes trust and treatment compliance.

Be positive. Mental health is a health problem like any other. Do what you can to de-stigmatize the patient's perspective. The analogy to diabetes is often helpful.

2. **Discuss strategies to learn more about their mental illness and positive parenting.**

Often parents with mental illness are prone to interpret their difficulties in managing the stresses of everyday life as illness-related personal deficits.

Patients with mental illness may require help assessing their parenting strengths, needs and goals. Resources that give patients the knowledge and tools to build their capacity as parents help them feel greater control over their lives. Such empowerment is paramount to the recovery process.

Web based resources for parents:

- "Parenting Well Through Depression". www.parentingwell.org
- www.parentalmentalillness.org

3. **Ask patient to invite others such as their partner, spouse, or close friend to treatment visits.** A support team that includes partners, close friends and professionals is helpful. This can also assist with more accurate reporting of symptoms and compliance with treatment.

4. **Refer to a trained counsellor or mental health specialist.**

Services that are family-centered and strength-based have proven to be the most effective in providing needed support to these families.

BC Association of Clinical Counsellors: www.bc-counsellors.org (1-800-909-6303)

BC Psychological Association: www.psychologists.bc.ca (1-800-730-0522)

BC Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: www.bcamft.bc.ca (1-604-687-6131)

BC Association of Social Workers: www.bcasw.org

Child and Youth Mental Health Services: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca

Adult Mental Health Services: www.health.gov.bc.ca/mhd

5. **Encourage patient and their support system to develop a Ulysses Agreement.**

A Ulysses Agreement is an advance planning document which patients complete when "well" to direct care of their children, should they become ill. For example, for a patient at risk of post partum depression, it gives her the assurance that the support team knows early warning signs and how to intervene in ways she would approve.

For more information on Ulysses Agreements and other items discussed in this tip sheet visit parentalmentalillness.org