



SUPPORTING
FAMILIES
New Zealand Ltd



Helping children cope

A guide to help children
understand mental illness

Are you concerned about discussing mental health issues with your children?

Are you worried about what to say to your children (tamariki/rangatahi) about your mental health issues, or that of other family whānau members?

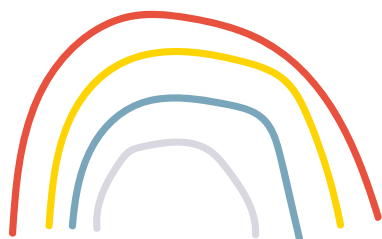
Do you feel your children may need more support?

Without accurate information and support, children/tamariki will reach their own conclusions about mental illness. They might feel scared, isolated, and confused.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

We're here to help you and your children/tamariki get the support and encouragement they need.

Let's get started!



Did I cause this? Replacing blame with peace of mind

When faced with mental health issues in their family whānau, children/tamariki may be worried and ask themselves:

- Did I cause it?
- Did somebody else cause it?
- Will I turn out the same?
- Whose fault is it?
- How can I fix it, and what can I do better?
- Why did it happen to my family member?
- Will it ever get better?

You can help your children/tamariki by talking with them about their concerns; helping ease their worries and ensuring they better understand mental illness.

How to talk to your children/tamariki about mental health issues

1. Be open, making sure you use age-appropriate language and explanations

Children/tamariki are very perceptive and will be aware of what is happening in their family and whānau already.

Remember the information you share needs to be appropriate for your child's age and developmental stage, and includes what they want to know at the time.

2. Help them make sense of what is happening to their family member

You may be wondering how to start the conversation, what to say and what your child needs to know.

Take it one step at a time and talk openly about the family whānau member's mental health.

It may help reduce your child's anxiety, leading to them asking questions and expressing how they feel.

3. Normalise their family member's mental illness

Remember mental illness is not uncommon. At least 1 in 5 people in New Zealand experience a similar thing in their lifetime.

4. Be simple and straightforward in your approach

Allow children/tamariki to ask questions. Share as much information as you can about their family whānau member's mental illness, behaviour, symptoms and treatment.



Questions your children/tamariki may ask

Once you start talking openly with your children/tamariki, they may ask you questions about what causes mental illness and if it is their fault.

They may also ask you:

- Why do you have it and my friend's family member doesn't?
- Are there different types of mental illness?
- Will I turn out the same?
- Will they get better?
- Can I make it better?
- What can I do to help?
- What should I do if things get really bad? Who am I allowed to talk to?
- Where can I ask for help?
- Is it ok to feel...?
- What do I do with my feelings?

What do your children/tamariki need?

First of all, they need accurate information about mental illness so they can process their feelings and concerns. They need to be reassured and know:

- Their thoughts and feelings are important and validated.
- They are loved and are not alone.
- They did not cause their family whānau member's mental illness.

It is important they realise what they can and cannot do to help their unwell family whānau member. You can help them understand:

- There are people that care and will support them.
- How to access and talk to safe adults about their worries.
- How to create a plan for when things get difficult or when there is a crisis.

Most importantly, they need opportunities to be kids and feel free of excessive responsibility or worry.

How can mental health support improve wellbeing?

Children who have knowledge about mental illness and strategies to manage their own wellbeing, develop less anxiety. They cope better at school and are more able to manage their own emotions.

Parents have told us that after their children completed a programme with Supporting Families NZ, they were more open to talking about their family situation and their feelings. The whole family began communicating better.



How Supporting Families NZ can help you

Every day we set out to ensure families and whānau feel listened to, supported, equipped and ultimately confident to overcome the challenges they face.

If you are concerned about talking to your children about mental illness, or think they need more support, please contact us. Our family whānau support workers can help you by providing support, information, education and advocacy services, such as:

- Listening to your concerns and questions
- Creating an action plan to help your children
- Providing books, articles and information about locally-available services
- Support groups
- Children Understanding Mental Illness programme

Our services are free and confidential. Contact us today to find out more.

**It takes each of us to make
a difference for all of us.**

**It's whānau ora, and it is the
foundation that inspires every
aspect of our work.**

Supporting Families NZ is a national organisation that specialises in providing support for families and whānau who have a loved one with mental health challenges.

After 40 years of experience working with people around New Zealand, we know that if family and whānau of a loved one experiencing mental distress are correctly supported and empowered, the path they walk has a greater potential to lead to restored wellbeing.

Positive change is our singular focus. By working together, we can help you thrive.



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supportingfamilies.org.nz