UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL ILLNESS
IN YOUR FAMILY

for young people who have a family member with

Mental Illness

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BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

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This booklet was adapted from materials developed by Sabin Sebastion MD, Birmingham, Alabama and the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

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"I can't understand her, my mom is sometimes so happy and excited about everything, then at other times she gets so sad that she doesn't even eat or sleep well."

- Taylor

"It's such a drag! My dad can't come and watch my games. My friends say my dad is strange. They won't come visit me because they are scared of him. Sometimes I am too, so I can't blame them, I guess."

- Denise

"I can't understand him, he keeps getting sad and gloomy for no reason or for little things! It's scary! It makes me frightened sometimes. I love my dad but this is hard."

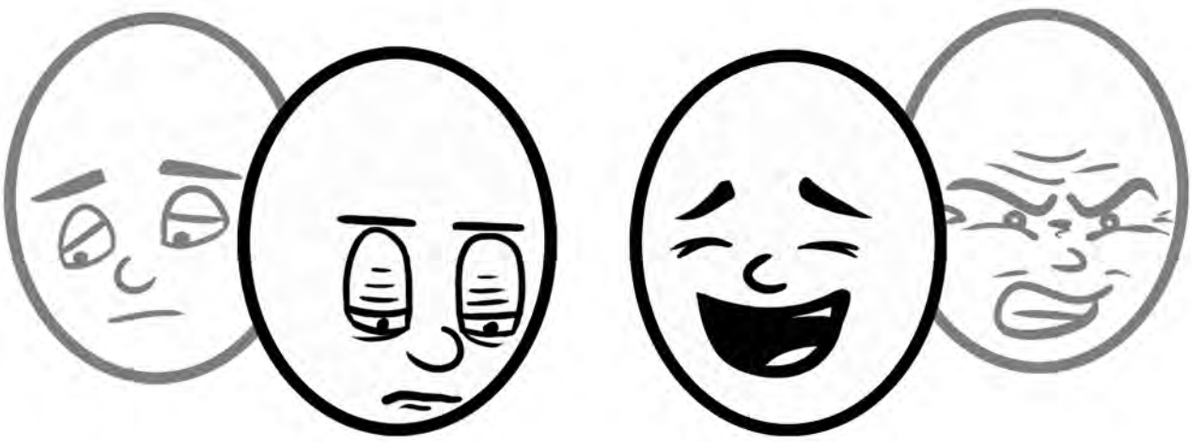
- Ian

If you have someone in your family with a **mental illness**, you may be wondering what is going on.

When a person has a mental illness, it means their brain is not working right.

Our brain controls how we think, feel and behave, so **mental illness** changes how a person thinks, feels and behaves.

A person with mental illness might have strong feelings like anger or sadness and they might say or do things that don't make sense.



They might act in ways that seem strange, confusing and even scary to the people around them, but it is important to remember that **mental illness** is an illness and it can be treated.

It is also important to know that mental illness is not anyone's fault. ***It's not your family member's fault and it's not your fault.***

There are many different types of mental illnesses.

Here are a few:

Schizophrenia

When a person has **schizophrenia**, their thinking gets mixed up. **They might see, hear or feel things that are not really there, like hearing voices.** They might believe things that aren't true, like thinking someone is trying to poison their food.

Their speech might be jumbled up and they might say things that don't make sense. ***They might also lose interest in things they used to enjoy, stop spending time with their family and friends and stop taking care of themselves.***

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder can be like a rollercoaster. **People with bipolar disorder go through times when they feel full of energy (mania) and times when they have very low energy (depression).**

With mania, a person might get really excited, talk really fast and believe they are extra special. They might also get angry and annoyed. **With depression, a person is very sad for long periods of time. They might stop doing things they enjoy and taking care of themselves.** Sometimes, people with **bipolar disorder** also hear, see and feel things that aren't real.

Depression

When a person has **depression**, they might feel very unhappy for long periods of time for no reason. **They might have very low energy and lose interest in the things they used to enjoy such as hobbies and spending time with family and friends.**

*Sometimes people with **depression** believe they are worthless and might lose hope that things will ever get better.*

Commonly Asked Questions

*If you find yourself with lots of questions about **mental illness**, you're not alone.*

Here are some questions people often ask:

What causes mental illness?

Just like the body, the brain can get sick too, but you can't catch **mental illness** from someone else like you catch a cold.

Mental illnesses are caused by a combination of different things. A person's genes can make them more likely to develop **mental illness**. **Genes are the building blocks that make us who we are and determine things like the colour of our hair or eyes.**

*If a person has genes that make them likely to have a **mental illness**, stressful situations in their life can add to this and cause them to develop a **mental illness**.*

Some examples of stressful situations are the death of a loved one, trauma or a car accident.

The use of substances like drugs and alcohol can also make a person more likely to develop a **mental illness** if they already have genes that make them prone to developing a **mental illness**.

Will I get mental illness?

Just because you have a family member with a mental illness, this does not mean you will get a mental illness.

If you are worried about your mental health or notice any changes in your thoughts, feelings or behaviour, talk to an adult you trust.

Commonly Asked Questions

Can it be treated?

Just like many other illnesses, mental illness can be treated. Medications can help people with mental illness feel better and get back to their daily life.

Counselling or therapy also helps people learn to understand and manage their illness.

How can I care for myself?

When someone you love has a **mental illness**, you may have a lot of different feelings. **You might feel confused or worried about what is happening.**

You might feel angry at your family member for their behavior or angry that this happened to your family. **You might even feel guilty and blame yourself for their mental illness.** *You might feel embarrassed by your family member, or you might feel sad.*

All of these feelings are okay! Feelings are not good nor bad, right nor wrong, feelings just are. **It is important to find healthy ways to let out your feelings by talking about them, journaling or drawing.** Find someone you trust to talk to about your feelings – a parent, grandparent, counsellor, teacher, aunt, uncle, etc.

It is also important to take care of yourself by doing things you enjoy, getting enough sleep, taking a break, being active, spending time with friends, and taking deep breaths.

Remember

Here are some important things to remember if someone in your family has a mental illness...

It's not your fault

No one can cause another person to have a mental illness.

Your feelings are okay

You may have a lot of different feelings. It's okay to feel sad, lonely, angry, confused or however you feel. Other people feel the same way.

Talk to someone you trust

Share your feelings with someone you trust – a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, counsellor or teacher.

Take care of yourself

Find things you enjoy doing. Play a sport, read, bake, dance, make art, spend time with friends, anything you find fun that helps you relax.

It can get better

With medication and help from doctors, counsellors, family and friends, people with mental illness do get better.

It's no joke

People should never make fun of mental illness.

Knowledge is power

It can be helpful to learn more about mental illness, so you understand what is happening for your family member. Then it won't seem so scary or confusing.

Remember the Three C's

I can't **C**ause it
I can't **C**hange it
I can **C**are for myself

Where Can I Learn More?

The following resources have more information about mental illness and how to cope when someone in your family has a mental illness:

Kids & Teens in Control Groups
Support and education groups for children and youth ages 8-18 who have a family member with mental illness.
bcss.org/kidsincontrol

COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness)
Information and videos about mental illness for young people who have a parent with mental illness.
copmi.net.au/kids-young-people

BC Schizophrenia Society
Information about schizophrenia and other mental illnesses.
bcss.org

HeretoHelp
Information and resources about mental health and substance use.
heretohelp.bc.ca

Need Help?

Kids Help Phone
Call *1-800-668-6868* or Text *CONNECT* to *686868*
kidshelpphone.ca

KUU-US Crisis Line – First Nations and Indigenous specific crisis line
Call *1-800-588-8717*

YouthinBC – Online crisis chat service
youthinbc.com

Crisis Centre Suicide Line
Call *1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)*

Things I Can Do To Help Myself

In an emergency I can call:

If I need someone to talk to I can call:

If I am looking for information I can call:

One person I can go to for help is:

Times when I may need help:

Things I can do to help myself feel better:

Notes

For more information on supporting families with mental illness, please contact:

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society
1100 – 1200 West 73rd Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6P 6G5

Phone: **604-270-7841**
Toll Free: **1-888-888-0029**
Email: **info@bcss.org**
Website: **www.bcss.org**

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