



When your parent has a mental health condition:

Our support pack for young people



Many parents struggle with a mental health issue or concerns. Often, their condition doesn't impact how they parent, or how able they are to look after their children. However, sometimes, they can.

Mental health issues can vary in severity and symptoms. Sometimes the signs may not be that obvious, whereas other times, you might strongly suspect that your parent or carer is struggling with a mental health issue. No two experiences are the same.

Sometimes, a mental health condition can make it difficult for parents to fully support their children. They might struggle with recognising or responding to their child's physical and emotional needs, and they may find it difficult to support their family financially. Some parents may also struggle with controlling their emotions, moods, or behaviour, and their ability to provide a safe home environment may be impacted.



While having a mental health issue is not a parent's fault, it can have a big impact on their family, particularly their children.

If you have a parent with a mental health condition, you might:

- have to prioritise their needs above your own
- feel worried or concerned for your parent
- be isolated or lonely
- feel angry or annoyed at your parent
- be unable to talk about your own feelings, worries, or experiences
- have to take on extra responsibilities, or grow up quickly
- feel concerned about being separated from your parent
- have witnessed traumatic or stressful events

It's really normal if you have lots of conflicting emotions around your parents' mental health struggles. For example, you might feel really loved by your parent but also feel worried about them, or feel unsafe at home.

We spoke to Jay* and Rita* about their experiences growing up with a parent living with a mental health condition. Here's what they had to say

*We used pseudonyms to protect the identities of our interviewees.

Jay's story

"My mum has depression and anxiety and has lived with it since I was a child. My dad also has depression, but has also had to navigate schizophrenia - a complex mental health condition where you may hear or see things that aren't real.

Note: Schizophrenia is more commonly referred to as psychosis today

"As a young person, I felt like my parents loved me more than anything and cared for me deeply. What I found most difficult was, whilst I felt loved, my mum's depression would cause major dips in her mood. Everything would feel fine one moment, and then I'd see a look of sadness. A look of someone who wasn't present. I'd see tears starting to fall. I became very used to these patterns of behaviour, as it was all I knew. My mum loved me and cared for me, but she wasn't always able to be the stable, calming presence I needed from a parent. If my mum wasn't low, she'd be in a state of worry. Something had either gone horribly wrong, or it was about to.

"My dad's mental health problems were a bit harder to understand and predict. His depression caused a lack of motivation or interest in doing anything, but his schizophrenia would make his mood unpredictable, and he was paranoid - something always felt suspicious to him. Being around this made me feel quite unsafe.

"Again, I know my parents loved me. I was an only child and felt like my parents' worlds revolved around me. But what I craved was to feel that my parents could support me, whatever I was going through. I didn't ever really feel this way, and I often found myself looking to other adults I had relationships with (like teachers) as parental figures."

Rita's story

“Having a parent with depression meant that life was sometimes unpredictable. Sometimes, my mum was fully present and was the mum I knew and liked being around. But, out of the blue, she'd then be someone quite different: distant, not herself, sad, and someone I didn't recognise. It changed the dynamics in our relationship, too. When things were good, she was my mum, and she took care of me. When things weren't so good, it was like I took care of her and her needs. It was like a role reversal. I know she couldn't help it, but it was a lot for me at such a young age.

“Family members sometimes weren't that helpful, either. They'd often say, 'Help your mum out', or 'Don't forget to be good for your mum; she's having a hard time at the moment.' I'd smile and nod, but inside I wanted to scream, 'It's hard for me, too!' Often, when someone has a mental health difficulty, the focus is on them. And that's important. But when that person is your parent, there needs to be just as much focus on the family members affected, too. Mental health difficulties can affect whole families.

“I felt really ashamed of my feelings as a child. Sometimes, I felt angry with my mum for being depressed, but I'd be too ashamed to say it out loud - and too protective of her feelings to say it to her face.”

What did you find helpful?

Journalling

Rita: “I wrote a diary most days, which really helped. It wasn’t just about how I felt about my mum, but everyday things, too. It was my lifeline, and I don’t know what I would have done without it. I imagined I was telling someone how I felt, and it was really useful. It meant I didn’t keep everything to myself. Complicated feelings like mine are so common, and if I could give any advice to my younger self, it would be to remind myself how important I was - and how absolutely entitled I was to feel how I felt.”

Peer support groups

Jay: “I will never forget the peer support groups I was able to attend. I met a group of young people who, like me, had parents and family members who had a mental health problem. The groups were full of helpful conversations, activities, and tasty snacks. What was also amazing about the groups was that everyone’s parents came along. I initially dreaded the thought of my mum and dad being there with me and amongst other people. My fear was either my mum would become tearful in front of everyone, or my dad’s paranoia would surface. It would be very uncomfortable, and I’d want to leave.

“None of this happened, and I noticed how relaxed they looked. They were amongst parents who also loved their children, but would sometimes struggle to cope.

“It was great to have conversations with other young people who just got it. We were supported by a professional member of the peer support group, who made the whole experience feel so safe. I felt so connected to everyone and just looked forward to seeing everyone each time.”

Speaking to a trusted teacher or professional

Jay: “At school there were a few people, such as my head of year and school counsellor, who I trusted and felt safe with. I could be honest with them, cry in front of them, and tell them what I was struggling with. It wasn’t always easy, but as I reflect on now, I realise the profound impact of speaking to someone I trusted.

“Whether I wanted to just sit in silence, express my sadness and worries, or simply make sense of my difficulties, they were there to listen deeply and not judge me. Having someone there I trusted and felt safe with was enough for me to be honest and explain that I had a lot on my mind.”

Finding comfort in a hobby

Jay: “I was reluctant to write down a hobby as something that helped me, as I wondered if anyone else reading this would find it a bit patronising. Perhaps [they would think], ‘How could a hobby help all of the difficulties that come with having a parent with a mental health problem?’

“My hobby was basketball. I trained with some of my classmates throughout secondary school and college. I played in my downstairs court outside my block of flats with a close friend of mine, or, sometimes, I played on my own for hours. It’s the time in my life I’ve felt the most joy. Complete bliss. Present and in the moment. It was a feeling that was quite rare for me, but the enjoyment I got from playing showed me feelings I was able to feel, and that I really deserved to feel.

“I felt like I was a part of a group, but [that I] also didn’t necessarily need the group, as I could always practise on my own, which was still really nice.”

Rita: “Having my own hobbies helped me develop my own identity. It often felt like all the emphasis and attention was on mum, and it felt like my personality sometimes got diluted by thinking about someone else. Doing what I enjoyed helped me realise I am my own person with interests and feelings. It was also a good distraction.”

Having a parent or family member with a mental health condition is a unique experience to everyone, and it can bring about lots of challenges. You might often feel helpless, or unsure about where you can go or what you can do.

After speaking with Jay and Rita, here is a summary of tips if you are in this situation:

- Find a way to express yourself and understand your feelings (such as through journaling)
- Talk to a trusted adult, such as a teacher or professional
- Look out for peer support groups where you can make connections
- Find comfort in a hobby
- Have a plan for if your situation worsens, such as knowing who to call and a safe place to go
- Seek support for your own mental health

It's really important to know that if you are struggling or finding things difficult, there is help.

Even though it might not feel like it, you are not alone, and there are lots of people out there who will relate to your story, or who have been through similar circumstances. While it might be tricky now, try to remember that this situation won't be forever:

Jay: "Now, in my late 20s, I view my parents through a very different lens than I did as a young person. They did their absolute best with the tools they had. Whilst their mental health problems brought many upsetting and difficult feelings for me back then, I now feel proud of my parents. I'm also proud of the person I've become, and my ability to give empathy and compassion to others. I think my parents might have had a little something to do with the person I've become."

Kooth is an online, mental health and wellbeing service for children and young people.

Some things we'd like you to always remember about Kooth include:

- We're completely free to use
- You're anonymous to us
- No bullying or trolling takes place on our site
- You don't need any kind of referral to join
- Signing up and getting started only takes a few minutes
- No problem is too small

What you'll find on Kooth includes:

- Live text-based chat sessions with a member of our team
- Send a message to to our team inbox anytime
- Community support from other young people
- A range of self-help tools
- Helpful content written by other young people and our professional team

Live chat times are:

- Monday to Friday: 12pm - 10pm
- Saturday and Sunday: 6pm - 10pm

Hours may vary during the Christmas period, new year period and bank holidays but we are available 365 days a year.

Some further support options:

Our Time: a service for children of parents with a mental issue, where you can find some helpful resources

Childline: send an email or call 0800 1111 to chat to a professional at Childline
Get support from a young carers group

