



Supporting each other | Nurturing your child and yourself

For parents who experience mental health
and/or substance use challenges



**Supporting Parents
Healthy Children**

Te tautoko i ngā mātua me ngā tamariki hauora

Supporting each other | Nurturing your child and yourself

Parents facing mental health and/or substance use challenges often work to balance looking after themselves while also supporting their child's emotional wellbeing. This means creating a safe, nurturing environment where both parent and child can grow together through mutual care and understanding.

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About this guide

For parents navigating mental health and/or substance use challenges

This guide has been created especially for you — parents who may be experiencing with mental health and/or substance use challenges.

It offers a gentle space to reflect on your role as a parent and provides practical tips to help strengthen the emotional and social wellbeing of your child, your whānau, and yourself.

You're not alone, and support is available to help you and your family thrive.

Written together, with experience and care

This information has been developed in partnership with parents who have experienced mental health and/or substance use challenges, along with their children and supporters.

We encourage you and your partner to read this booklet together and talk about what it means for your whānau.

If you don't have a partner, it can be just as valuable to kōrero with a trusted friend, whānau member, or your mental health professional. You're not alone — support and understanding are always within reach.

About the terms used

- **'Parenting while experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges'** refers to anyone navigating mental health and/or substance use challenges — whether formally diagnosed or not — acknowledging the strength it takes to care for others with mental health and/or substance use challenges while managing your own wellbeing.
- **'Unwell'** - describes times when challenges feel more intense, and extra support, respite, or hospital care may be helpful. These are moments when care for you matters too.
- **'Parents'** - includes all caregivers — biological parents, grandparents, step-parents, partners, foster carers, and any adult with a caring role in a child's life.
- **'Child'** - refers to one or more tamariki, including teenagers and young adults. We recognise your continued care across all ages and stages.
- **'Why this matters'** - We use inclusive, strengths-based language that respects your lived experience and supports your journey as a caregiver and whānau leader.

Parenting while experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges

Parenting is a deeply meaningful and personal journey. When you're also navigating mental health and/or substance use challenges, that journey can be more complex — but it also reveals strengths that often go unseen. It takes incredible courage to care for others while managing your own wellbeing, and every step you take matters.

These challenges may influence your daily routines, your ability to be emotionally present, or how you respond when things feel overwhelming. You might feel guilt, isolation, or doubt — but those feelings are not a reflection of failure. They are signs of how deeply you care. Recognising these emotions is the first step toward growth, not a reason to feel ashamed.

Many parents live with mental distress, addiction, trauma, or emotional hardship. Some have received a formal diagnosis; others have not. Regardless of where you are in your journey, your experience is valid. What matters most is knowing that support is available, and you do not have to carry everything on your own.

Your identity as a parent is not defined by your diagnosis, your worst day, or what you're struggling with right now. It is shaped by your commitment to your tamariki, your willingness to reflect, and your desire to create a safe and loving space for your whānau. These things show your mana as a parent.

This guide is designed to walk with you. It encourages reflection on your strengths, your child's needs, and what you both need to feel connected and supported. The activities and ideas included here are not about doing everything perfectly — they're about taking small, kind steps toward healing and connection.

Reaching out for help, even just having a conversation, is an act of leadership. It models to your children the importance of self-awareness, seeking support, and valuing mental wellbeing. These are lessons they will carry for life.

Whether you're parenting as a solo caregiver, in a shared parenting arrangement, within a blended family, as part of a wider whānau, or in any other form that reflects your culture and identity — your role matters. Your lived experience is not a barrier; it is part of the wisdom you bring to parenting.

Mental health and/or substance use challenges can affect the whole whānau — not just the parent who is experiencing them. Tamariki often notice when

something feels different at home, even if they can't fully explain it. These changes can influence how children feel, behave, and respond to the world around them.

Parenting during tough times can feel especially demanding. When you're struggling with your own mental health and/or substance use challenges, you might find it harder to stay patient, keep routines, or be fully present with your child. Your energy may be low, your emotions may feel unpredictable, and even small parenting tasks might seem overwhelming. It's normal to feel guilty, worried, or unsure about how this is affecting your child.

But here's the important truth: your connection with your child still matters — and you can make a difference. Children are often more resilient than we realise, especially when they feel safe, loved, and understood.

This guide can help you take small and meaningful steps to strengthen that connection. By recognising both your child's strengths and the challenges they may be facing, you can begin to support their emotional development in practical and caring ways. You may also discover and celebrate strengths within yourself and your whānau that you hadn't noticed before.

The activities in this guide are designed to help you reflect on your parenting, your relationship with your child, and areas where small changes can make things easier for both of you. They are not about doing everything perfectly — they're about progress, not perfection.

Try to work through the guide when you're feeling relatively well, rested, or calm. If you're finding things difficult, ask a trusted person to do the activities with you. You don't have to do this alone.

Every positive step, no matter how small, helps to build a more connected, caring, and supportive future for both you and your child.

There is a network of people — professionals, support workers, other parents, and community groups — who are here to support you. Healing takes time, and progress doesn't always look the same for everyone. But every step you take toward caring for yourself is also a step toward strengthening your whānau.

Remember: you can be a great parent and still need support.

Strong family & whānau relationships

Your child's relationships, especially with you and family or whānau, play a crucial role in their wellbeing. Strong, supportive connections help build resilience, enabling them to better cope with life's challenges.

Whether you are well or unwell, prioritising your relationship with your child is essential. Showing affection, engaging in their daily life, and spending quality time together helps your child feel secure, loved, emotionally connected, and valued.

Keeping connected when you are unwell

Parenting requires a lot of time and energy. It can be hard to meet all your child's needs. If you are unwell this can be more difficult. It is helpful to think about ways you can still connect with your child.

When you are in respite or hospital

When you are in respite or hospital, it means taking a break to focus on your own health or receive medical care. Respite provides time for rest and recovery, while hospital stays are for treatment or support during a period of illness or as a consequence of mental health and/or substance use challenges.

If you are unwell and need time in hospital, staying connected with your child is important. You can talk to your mental health team about ways to support communication, such as through phone calls, video chats, or arranging visits, to help your child feel supported and reassured during your time away.



Try these ideas!

- Ask your family or whānau or the staff to send a message to your child, or send a text message from your mobile phone.
- Send a letter/email, or ask family or whānau or staff to help you write one.
- Arrange a phone call or video call.
- Plan a visit with your child at a time when it suits you both. There might be a family or whānau room where you can spend time together.
- Arrange for leave from hospital to do a family or whānau activity or to spend quiet time at home with your child and family or whānau.
- Make time to give your child a chance to talk with you about their day. Explain why this is the best time for you to talk and absorb things.
- If you find it hard to talk, explain that you would like to have time just listening, and that you may not 'have the energy to talk a lot today'.
- It can be good to ask young children to draw a picture of their day or the important things that happen to them, or to ask older children to take a photo on their mobile phone. You can discuss or view these together later. This can help to keep you connected with their experiences and is a fantastic way to hear about what is important to them.
- Ask your child to read or tell you a story if you are feeling exhausted or finding it hard to talk. It allows you to spend time together.
- As you start to feel better, try to spend more time with your child.
- During these times, find ways to talk with your child about their day and connect with how they are feeling.

If you are worried about your relationship with your child, speak to your mental health professionals and ask them for information about what you can do or who can help.

Your thoughts matter

Your thoughts matter is a dedicated space where you can focus on expressing yourself through writing. Whether you're journaling, reflecting, or taking notes, this space is designed to help you feel calm, safe, and free to think. A comfortable, quiet, and organised writing space supports clarity and creativity, helping you engage more fully in the process.

Parts of this guide may ask you to pause and write down your thoughts, reflect on your experiences, or jot down ideas. These moments are clearly marked throughout the document — so if you're unsure or forget what to do, you can refer to these notes or prompts for guidance. This approach allows you to move at your own pace and return to your writing space whenever you feel ready, making the experience gentle, supportive, and enhancement.

"When I was in the depths of my depression and exhaustion, Maddie would come in and read a book to me and then we would cuddle afterwards. It was a way of us just having some time together on our own. Tim (her father) would call it 'tucking Mummy in' before I went to bed."

Lisa, parent

What are your favourite things to do as a family or whānau?

What do you think your child would say they enjoy the most?

When you are unwell, what things can you still do together with your child to help them feel secure and loved?

How can you plan these times? Who can support you to make these plans?

Family or whānau activities

Spending time and having fun together as a family or whānau is an impactful way to strengthen relationships and support your child's wellbeing. It's often the small, everyday moments — like reading a story, sharing a meal, chatting during a car ride, or going for a walk — that build connection, create memories, and nurture a strong sense of belonging.

As a parent, it's common to focus so much on caring for your family or whānau that your own needs are overlooked. Taking time to care for yourself is not only important for your wellbeing — it also strengthens your ability to parent effectively.

Likewise, it's beneficial for your child to build safe, supportive relationships beyond the immediate family. Spending time with a grandparent, aunty or uncle, other relatives, or trusted family friends helps your child develop confidence, social skills, and a wider sense of belonging. Whether it's for a few hours or longer, these connections enrich their world and support their growth.

Encourage activities outside of the home

It is important to help your child to experience success at school, and also in leisure and social activities. Encouraging your child to pursue different interests gives them the opportunity to make friends, develop their confidence, strengthen their social skills and connect with others in the community.

Some helpful tips:

- Help your child to thrive at childcare, pre-school or school by encouraging healthy routines. (e.g., getting adequate sleep, eating nutritious food for energy and concentration) and getting them involved in different activities.
- Find some safe, free or inexpensive activities in the local community (e.g., visit playgrounds, parks, libraries, clubs and groups).
- Think about ways to keep your child involved in activities when you are unwell (e.g., getting help from family or whānau or friends to get them to regular activities).

Consider talking to your child's school about how they are progressing and ways peer support groups can help.

Many children of parents who experience mental health and/or substance use challenges have shared how valuable peer support groups can be for their overall wellbeing. These groups offer a safe, welcoming space where young people can connect with others who understand what they're going through. By sharing experiences, offering encouragement, and simply spending time together, children and young people gain a sense of belonging, reduce feelings of isolation, and develop important coping skills.

Peer support groups also help build confidence and resilience by allowing tamariki and rangatahi to express themselves, learn from others, and recognise that they are not alone in their experiences. For some, these groups become a key source of emotional support and even friendships that last beyond the sessions.

To find a peer support group near you, speak with your mental health team or contact the Supporting Families NZ mental health team, who can help connect you with appropriate services and local opportunities. mentalhealth.org.nz/links/link/supporting-families-new-zealand



Maintaining routines

A predictable daily routine offers stability and comfort, especially for children whose parent may be experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges. Familiar routines — such as regular mealtimes, getting ready for school, reading a bedtime story, or tucking your child in at night — create a sense of normalcy that helps tamariki feel safe and cared for, even during uncertain times.

When you're unwell, sticking to these routines can be especially helpful — not just for your child, but for you too. Simple rituals can provide a gentle structure to the day and reinforce connection. If you find that you're not able to maintain these routines yourself, it's okay to reach out. Ask your partner, a whānau member, or another trusted adult in your child's life to help. Involving others not only supports your child's wellbeing, it also reinforces their network of care and belonging.

Maintaining consistency, even in small ways, can make a big difference in helping your child feel secure and supported, while also giving you space to focus on your own health and recovery.



Your thoughts matter

What is your child's regular routine on weekdays and weekends?

What are the important activities in your child's life?

How can these be supported when things get tough? Who else can help?



Household chores

Every household has its own way of managing chores. When you are unwell it can be hard to stay on top of this. Talking about chores as a family or whānau and negotiating who will do things when you are unwell is important.

If your child is taking on a range of extra responsibilities that get in the way of childhood activities, you can:

- Seek support from family or whānau or friends.
- Find ways to reduce your child's load.

You might also consider talking with a mental health professional, school staff, or a trusted community support worker who can help you identify practical strategies and support services.

It's important for your child to have regular opportunities to relax and enjoy their childhood. This could include:

- Playing sports or joining a local club (e.g., kapa haka, Scouts, or a youth group).
- Spending time outdoors at the park or beach.
- Engaging in creative activities like drawing, painting, music, or dance.
- Having playdates or sleepovers with friends or cousins.
- Reading for fun, watching movies together, or enjoying family game nights.
- Attending community events or holiday programmes.

These experiences help your child build confidence, develop friendships, and feel a sense of belonging — reminding them that they are supported and valued beyond any responsibilities they may take on at home.

Changing roles and routines

As you feel better, it is good to let your child know when you can cope with household chores again. If you find your child is reluctant or uneasy about this, it can help to talk to them about wanting to step back into your role as a parent and the importance of this to you. Remember to thank your child. Tell them you would like them to spend more time being themselves.

As they see you gradually take back more tasks, they will probably feel more confident about letting go of household chores.

It is important to tell your child about how you are feeling and that being a parent is important to you. Keep checking in with them about how they are feeling.

Let children be children

It's important to remember that a child is not a mini adult. Children need time, space, and freedom to grow, explore, and enjoy being young. When children take on too many adult responsibilities — like caregiving, worrying about finances, or managing household tasks — they can miss out on key parts of their development.

Children thrive when they are allowed to play, learn, make mistakes, and just be themselves without the pressure of adult concerns. While it's natural for tamariki to want to help or be involved, they shouldn't carry burdens that are beyond their age or understanding.

By protecting your child's right to be a child, you are helping to nurture their emotional wellbeing, resilience, and long-term mental health. Creating safe, supportive environments where they can laugh, play, and connect is one of the greatest gifts we can offer them.

Your thoughts matter

When you are unwell, what extra chores does your child pick up?

How do chores affect your child's activities?

Who else can help with the chores, so that your child can spend time being a kid?

What can you do to check in with family or whānau members to make sure they are okay?

Managing conflict

Conflict is a natural part of family life and can arise for many reasons — especially during times of stress or when you are feeling unwell. What matters most is how we respond to conflict and the steps we take to repair and strengthen relationships afterward.

When left unresolved, conflict can impact your connection with your child, potentially causing confusion, stress, or emotional distance. However, conflict can also be an opportunity for learning and growth — for both you and your child.

By managing conflict in calm, respectful, and age-appropriate ways, you model healthy communication, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills. This teaches your child that disagreements can be handled safely and constructively. Strategies like taking a break to cool down, listening to each other's feelings, and finding solutions together can help reduce tension and build stronger relationships over time.

Support is available. If you need help navigating family conflict, reach out to a trusted support person, whānau member, or mental health professional. You're not alone, and there are tools and people ready to support you.

Keeping the peace: What helps when you're not feeling your best

1. Open and safe communication

- Set aside a time to talk calmly with your child — ask how they're feeling and really listen.
- Use kind, non-blaming language: "I'm feeling tired today and might need some quiet. Let's talk later when I've rested."
- Encourage your child to express their feelings too, without fear of getting in trouble.
- Remember to say sorry if your behaviour has caused conflict.

2. Use whānau or community support

- Involve trusted family members or friends to help mediate or support difficult conversations.
- In Māori and Pacific cultures, kaumātua, aiga, or church leaders can help hold space for healing kōrero.

- Making sure that your child has someone else to talk to if they are feeling stressed or concerned (e.g., family or whānau, friends or a professional).
- Creating a family or whānau language that can be used to check on your mental health and/or substance use and your level of stress. This can also help individuals to express what they are seeing or what is worrying them.

3. Time-out or breathing space

- If things get heated, suggest taking a break to cool down — both adult and child.
- Use deep breathing, go for a walk, or do something calming like listening to music or colouring together.
- Being aware of how your mental health and/or substance use challenges might affect your behaviour in stressful situations (e.g., short temper, withdrawn, sad).

4. Shared whānau activities

- Do something positive together to rebuild connection — cooking, storytelling, or a short walk can reset tension.
- For tamariki, play can be a natural way to reconnect and relieve stress.

5. Create and agree on family guidelines

- Develop simple whānau rules or routines when things are calm — like "We speak kindly" or "We take turns talking."
- Display them on the fridge or a wall in your whare as a gentle reminder.
- Encouraging family or whānau members to express their feelings about what it is like for them when you are not well.

6. Seek professional support early

- Talk to a counsellor, social worker, or family support worker who understands your culture and situation.
- Use peer support groups, especially those that cater to Māori, Pacific, or Rainbow communities.

When things get tough

When things get tough, it's okay to feel overwhelmed. Life can bring challenges — whether it's with your health, relationships, finances, or parenting — and during these times, it's important to know you're not alone. Reaching out for help, talking to someone you trust, or simply taking small steps to care for yourself can make a big difference. Tough times don't last forever, and with the right support and strategies, you and your whānau can find strength, hope, and resilience together.

For parents: When things get tough, it's okay to not have all the answers. Parenting can be hard — especially when you're also dealing with your own challenges. Whether it's mental health, finances, or feeling stretched thin, remember you're not alone. Reaching out for support, even in small ways, can help lighten the load. Your wellbeing matters, and when you're supported, you're better able to support your tamariki. Every step you take is a sign of strength.

For youth: When life gets hard, it's normal to feel stuck or unsure. Sometimes things feel heavy — at home, school, or in your head — and you might not know where to start. You don't have to go through it alone. Talking to someone you trust, asking for help, or even just taking one small step forward can make a big difference. There's strength in being honest about how you're feeling. You're never alone, and there's always hope.

For service providers/practitioners: When things get tough for whānau, your support can make a lasting impact. The challenges families face is often complex and layered. By offering empathy, culturally responsive care, and strength-based strategies, we can help create safe and trusting spaces for whānau to open and heal. Even during the hardest times, meaningful connection and consistent support can empower families to move forward with hope and resilience.

Here are some tips:

- Think about practical things that will help you and your child. Consider the people in your life who could help (e.g., relatives, friends or community groups).
- Talk with them about what you might need. Be honest about what will really help. Let them know when and how they can assist, including how long you might need their support for.

- Talk to a health professional about how your experiences or medication affect your parenting.
- Find out about the support and services in your local area (they are different in each part of the country).
- Think about who can help with these tips.

Remember:

- Asking for help is a sign of courage and strength!
- Your child can learn by observing you and seeing how important it is to look for and accept help when it is needed – making you a role model.

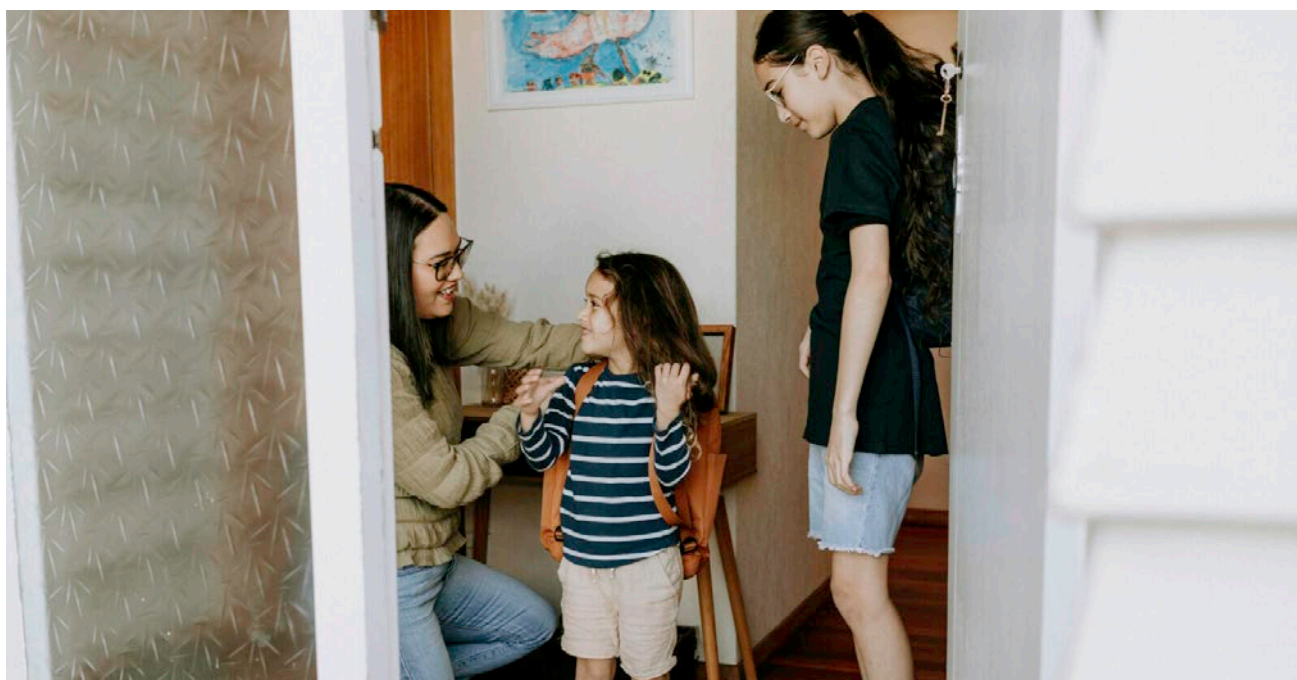
Taking care of your family or whānau

- A lot of parents who experience mental health and/or substance use challenges find there are times when they are well, unwell or periods of 'crisis'. They may feel they can't cope and need extra support or emergency help. It may be decided that you need to spend some time in respite or hospital.
- It can help your child and family or whānau to be prepared for these times by creating a care plan. This is a plan that lets others know what your family or whānau's wishes are when things get tough.
- A care plan is not a legally binding document. It outlines your family or whānau's preferences to support the predictability and familiarity of everyday routines that your child needs to feel safe and secure.

Your care plan:

A care plan is a personalised, written plan that outlines the support a parent with mental health and/or substance use challenges may need, while also considering the wellbeing of their tamariki and whānau. It includes key information such as early warning signs, preferred ways to be supported, important contacts, treatment options, and steps to take if things become difficult.

The care plan helps ensure that everyone involved — parents, tamariki, whānau, and health professionals — are informed, prepared, and working together. It supports safety, connection, and clear communication, while respecting the parent's voice, cultural values, and the strengths of their whānau.



Your child's relationships and routines

Detail the important people and daily rhythms that give your child a sense of stability, connection, and comfort. This might include who they spend time with (e.g., grandparents, cousins, teachers), regular activities (e.g., school, sports, after-school care), bedtime routines, meals, or cultural or spiritual practices that are part of their daily life. These familiar structures help tamariki feel secure, especially during times of change or uncertainty.

How others can help to maintain your child's relationships and routines

Outline the ways trusted whānau members, friends, or support workers can step in to keep things as normal as possible for your child. This may include taking them to school, attending events, helping with homework, or continuing cultural and spiritual practices. Clearly naming who can do what ensures tamariki feel supported and cared for by people they know and trust, keeping their emotional environment safe and consistent.

How it is best to stay in touch with your child when you are receiving treatment or in hospital?

Indicate how and when you'd like to keep in contact with your child while you're away — for example, through video calls, drawings, letters, or visits if appropriate. This helps your child feel connected to you, reassured of your love, and supported in understanding that your absence is temporary. Consistent communication, even in small ways, supports attachment and emotional stability.

What your child is told about you with mental health and/or substance use challenges

Specify the kind of language and level of information you feel comfortable having shared with your child about your mental health and/or substance use challenges. This ensures honesty while protecting the child's emotional safety. Keep the explanation age-appropriate, strengths-based, and hopeful — for example, "Mum isn't feeling well right now and is getting some help to feel better." You can also note who should share this information with your child, and whether cultural values or spiritual beliefs should guide how it's explained.

The care plan should detail:

- Your child's relationships and routines.
- How others can help to maintain your child's relationships and routines.
- How it is best to stay in touch with your child when you are receiving treatment in respite or hospital.
- What your child is told about you with mental health and/or substance use challenges.

Write a care plan when you're well with someone you trust — like a partner, whānau member, or mental health professional. This helps ensure your child's routines and needs are supported if your mental health becomes more challenging.

Care plan templates are available from:

www.copmi.net.au/parents/helping-my-child-and-family/about-care-plans/

Helping your child understand mental health and/or substance use challenges

Helping your child understand your mental health and/or substance use challenge is key to reducing confusion and anxiety. By explaining things in an age-appropriate way, you create a supportive environment where your child feels secure and involved in the family's journey. This understanding fosters trust, resilience, and emotional connection, allowing your child to feel empowered and part of the healing process.

Talking to your child about your mental health and/or substance use challenges

Research shows that when parents talk openly about their mental health and/or substance use challenges with their child, in language they can understand, it helps them to make sense of what is happening in the family or whānau.

Talking openly about mental health and/or substance use challenges with your child can:

- Help them to know that it is okay to talk about mental health and/or substance use challenges.
- Allow them to ask questions and get the correct information.
- Help them to come to you (or others) when they are worried or feel overwhelmed.
- Strengthen your relationship.
- Confront any stigmas around mental health and/or substance use challenges.

Developing your own understanding

Most parents find it difficult to talk about their mental health and/or substance use challenges. They don't know what to say to their child, or how to explain what is going on for them.

There are a lot of booklets, fact sheets and websites that you can browse for ideas to help you and your child to understand more about mental health and/or substance use challenges and how you can talk together as a family or whānau.

A good starting point might be COPMI's 'About with mental health and/or substance use challenges' videos for young people. You can watch these with your child and use them to start conversations:

www.copmi.net.au/resources/about-mental-illness-videos-youth/

Thinking about how your mental health and/or substance use challenges affect you and those around you.

An important first step in preparing to have conversations with your child is to think about:

- The way that mental health and/or substance use challenges impact on your life.
- What your child sees and hears.
- How your child may feel.



Your thoughts matter

Do this with a partner, a friend or a health professional. They may have a unique perspective on the impact of your mental health and/or substance use challenges.

List the things about your mental health and/or substance use challenges that worry you. Focus on those that have the biggest impact on you as a parent.

What do you think your child sees, hears and feels when you are stressed or unwell?

Identifying triggers

Everyone will have their own triggers or situations that can cause stress and lead to mental health and/or substance use challenges getting worse.

Recognising what your own triggers are can help you to understand your mental health and/or substance use challenges.

It can also be useful to speak to your family or whānau, as it is often the people closest to you that are the first to notice your triggers and the early changes in your behaviour.

Having a shared language about this can help your child feel comfortable with raising what is worrying them.

Common triggers can include:

- Poor sleep
- Significant life changes (e.g., having a baby, moving house, changing jobs)

- Financial pressures
- Loss or grief
- Relationship problems
- An unpleasant experience where you might have felt disappointed in yourself or criticised by others
- Certain times of the year (e.g., particular seasons, anniversaries of events)
- Health concerns for you or a family or whānau member
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Changes in your treatment plan or medication
- Specific situations (e.g., going into a busy public place)

Your thoughts matter

Think about specific situations that you find stressful and have triggered your mental health and/or substance use challenges in the past.

Strategies that can help your mental health and/or substance use challenges

Think about the things that have been helpful when you have started to feel unwell. Sharing these with your family or whānau will help them to understand the strategies you need to put into place to feel better.

Some examples might include:

- Talking with a friend, loved one or your health care professional
- Going for a walk outside
- Doing an activity that you enjoy
- Writing or drawing to help express your feelings and thoughts
- Spending time on a hobby
- Going to a peer support group
- Exercising
- Cutting back on the responsibilities that are not essential

Your thoughts matter

List the strategies that can help your mental health and/or substance use challenges.

Do you need support for your child while you put the strategies in place?

Who can support you?

Family or whānau recovery

Recovery will mean different things to different people. For some people, recovery may mean feeling empowered to achieve the best quality of life they can when experiencing some mental health and/or substance use challenges. For others, recovery will mean an opportunity to strengthen relationships and make positive changes to their life and priorities.

It is important to view recovery as a family or whānau process as much as it is an individual process.

Your thoughts matter

What does recovery mean to you? What is important in your own recovery?

What does recovery mean to your family or whānau?

What would be important in your family or whānau's recovery?

What would help you and your family or whānau to understand recovery?

Check out the 'Getting better' video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=po8jXk8hG8U

Your child's understanding

Children of different ages and stages of development will make sense out of what they see from you and your behaviour and draw their own conclusions from it.

Think about the situation from your child's point of view. What might they have noticed about your mental health and/or substance use challenges, and how might they make sense of them?

Identify your child's age and developmental stage and use the writing spaces provided to help you consider this.

Pēpi

Pēpi might not understand what you say, however they are very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions, your pēpi also seems more restless.

You don't need to explain your mental health and/or substance use challenges to your pēpi, but your pēpi will be aware of your mood and behaviour.

Think about a moment when you have been unwell and with your pēpi:

- What do you think your pēpi saw when they were looking into your face and listening to your voice?
- What did you notice about your pēpi's reaction to you?
- What can you do differently?

Teenagers

Relationships with teenagers are complex. Teenagers are developing an adult view of the world. They are trying to make sense of their relationships with you and with others. Your behaviour may challenge how they see you and how they see themselves. It is common for teenagers to worry about you and your mental health and/or substance use challenges and how this affects their relationship with you.

Your teenager can understand more factual and complex information than younger children. They are usually better able to express their feelings and thoughts. They may want to know how you were diagnosed and whether you will get better. Some teenagers worry about whether they will develop mental health and/or substance use challenges. They may want to know how to explain your mental health and/or substance use challenges to others without feeling like they are being disrespectful or disloyal to you.

Thinking about how your mental health and/or substance use challenges impact on your life:

- How might your behaviour be affecting your teenager?
- How might your mental health and/or substance use challenges impact your relationship with your teenager?
- Which behaviour appears to be the most challenging for them?
- What do you think they might be feeling?
- How might this affect your teenager's involvement with community activities, friends or peers?
- How might your mental health and/or substance use challenges be affecting their decisions?
- What concerns might your teenager have about their own mental health and/or substance use?
- What information could help your teenagers to understand what they have seen about your behaviour?
- What can you do differently?

Starting the conversation



By offering gentle, respectful guidance, that encourages open, age appropriate communication, parents with mental health and/or substance use challenges can feel confident to share their experiences. This can build trust, reduce fear or confusion for the child, and strengthen the family's ability to cope together.

What to expect

Your child's need for information will change as they grow. For this reason, it is helpful to think about the idea of starting a first conversation that will lead to other talks over time. Children are often pleased to learn that it is not their fault and that you are getting help and are safe.

Where and when to start

It can be good to think about where and when you want to have the conversation. It should be at a time that you and your child feel safe and comfortable, and preferably when you won't be disturbed.

Some helpful tips:

- Discuss what is happening to you and how it affects you. Remember there is no need to share everything (you can decide how much to tell your child). Talking through what to say with your partner, a good friend or your mental health professional can be helpful.
- Consider your child's age and ability to understand the information you give them to ensure they feel relaxed and can understand the conversation.
- Think about the language you use. Medical explanations for mental health and/or substance use challenges should be simple and easy for your child to understand.
- Be clear that it is not their fault, and it is not their responsibility to make you feel better.
- Ask about their fears and worries and then make plans to address them.
- Be reassuring and remind your child that you care about them and are getting help. It is important that your child knows there is a plan to make sure their needs will be met.
- Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. Set up a process so that if you are too unwell or don't have the energy, they still feel valued and know there will be a time when you can talk.

Getting started

You might start a conversation with:

- *"I've noticed some changes, and I want to talk about them with you."*
- *"I'm facing some mental health and/or substance use challenges, but it's not your fault."*
- *"What have you noticed or been thinking about?"*

You might invite your child to talk about what they have noticed or are worried about:

- *"What have you noticed?"*
- *"I am here to talk to you if you have any questions or are worried."*
- *"If you feel you can't come to me, you can talk to..."*

An example:

"You might have noticed I do not seem to have much energy, and I am always tired. Being tired is part of the mental health challenges that I'm facing. I want you to know you have not caused this and it is not your fault. I don't like feeling like this and it must be hard for you to understand when you see me tired and sleeping a lot."

Some tips to remember:

- Often the first discussion is the most daunting.
- Communicate with your child in a way that matches their age and understanding, using simple and clear language.
- Stop and pause after each new bit of information.
- Give your child time to think and to ask questions.
- If you do not know the answer, tell them and say you will find out, or maybe you can find out together.
- One discussion is never enough – a shared understanding takes time and your child's questions and need for information will change as they grow.
- Small conversations can build on your child's and your family or whānau's shared understanding over time.
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important.
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you cannot answer their questions, they can seek answers from a person that you both trust.

Additional support

Other trusted adults can be helpful when trying to explain your experiences to your child. Consider grandparents, other families or whānau, or good friends.

Have a conversation with these people. Tell them what information you have given to your child and the information that you would like them to share with your child.

Ask them to tell you if they are worried about your child.



When you are worried about your child



Parents worry about their child, particularly when they express feelings like anger, sadness, frustration or anxiety. It is healthy for children to express a range of emotions.

You know your child better than anyone else. If you are worried about their emotional health, consider talking to a doctor or mental health professional.

It is important to seek help for your child if they are:

- Regularly upset or anxious.
- Difficult to comfort or having problems that seem to be getting worse.
- Showing sudden changes in usual behaviour that last longer than two weeks (or involved hurting themselves or other people).
- Having emotional problems that get in the way of their daily routines and activities.
- Having problems with eating, sleeping, concentrating or doing usual tasks like schoolwork or attending regular social or family or whānau activities.
- Developing slower than you think they should.

Who can support you if you're worried about your child?

A partner, family or whānau member or friend may be able to support you to seek help for your child.

Who can help?

Initially, contact a health professional such as your doctor. They can recommend a range of services available to support you and your child.

It is important to remember that you, your child and family or whānau are not alone. There is a lot of support available for you and several ways to get it if you need it. Explore the best options for you with a health professional.

Honouring cultural perspectives

When you're facing mental health and/or substance use challenges, one of the most meaningful ways you can support your child is by drawing strength from your culture. Culture provides guidance, identity, values, and a sense of belonging — not just for you, but for your child and whānau too. Understanding and including your cultural practices in how you talk with and support your child helps them feel safe, connected, and proud of who they are.

Every whānau has its own way of navigating challenges. Some families turn to spiritual practices, others to elders, storytelling, or time spent on the whenua (land). Some use song, language, prayer, or collective gatherings to make sense of their journey. These practices aren't just traditions, they are tools of healing, connection, and resilience.

You can support your child by:

Embracing cultural identity – Talk about your whakapapa or family history, values, and stories. Celebrate the strength that comes from your culture.

Creating safe spaces – Make room for your child to express themselves in the ways that feel right to them — whether that's through words, art, music, or quiet reflection.

Leaning on your community – Reach out to trusted whānau, cultural leaders, or support services who understand your worldviews and can walk alongside you.

Involving cultural practices in daily life – Even small things like sharing karakia, speaking your language, or attending cultural events can ground your child and provide comfort and routine.

Remember, your culture is a strength – It's something to draw on — not only for you as a parent but as a powerful support for your child's emotional wellbeing and understanding. When you bring your whole self into your parenting, you give your child permission to do the same.



A parent's voice | Supporting my child through our culture

"As a parent, I want my child to feel safe, loved, and proud of who they are — especially when things are tough. One of the ways I can help them is by bringing our culture into how we live, talk, and support each other. Our culture holds so much strength. It helps me understand who I am, and it gives my child a strong foundation too. I know that when I share our stories, our language, and our traditions, I'm helping my child feel connected and grounded. Even when I'm not feeling my best, I can still teach them through simple things — like a karakia, a favourite song from home, a story about our tipuna (ancestors), or just explaining how we do things in our whānau. When I include our culture, I'm not just teaching them about the past — I'm giving them tools to understand what's happening now. I can explain my mental health in a way that makes sense to us. I can show them that it's okay to talk about how we feel, and that healing is something we can do together — with the help of our whānau, community, and cultural strengths. Our culture helps me show my child that they belong, that they are loved, and that they are never alone."

Embracing diversity in whānau wellbeing and support

All whānau are different, and that diversity is a source of strength. Whether you identify as Tangata Whaikaha (disabled person), part of the Rainbow+ community, Asian, Pacific, Māori, Pākehā, recent migrant, or any other cultural or social identity — your experiences, identity, and values matter. Your journey as a parent or caregiver is unique, and so is the way you and your whānau navigate mental health and wellbeing.

This guide recognises that one size does not fit all. Some families may experience stigma, isolation, or barriers when seeking help — especially when identities intersect, such as being a disabled parent, in the Rainbow+ community or being a migrant carer without extended whānau support. It's important that your identity is seen as a strength, not a challenge.

We acknowledge:

- Tangata Whaikaha and those living with visible and invisible disabilities bring resilience, innovation, and powerful insight to whānau wellbeing.
- Rainbow+ parents and whānau may experience unique challenges but also deep strengths in fostering inclusive, loving, and affirming environments.

- Asian whānau and migrant families may hold strong cultural values around care, family responsibility, and emotional expression that shape how support is given and received.
- Multicultural, interfaith, and intergenerational families enrich whānau life through diverse ways of showing care, healing, and connection.
- Māori whānau: A collective of extended family connected by whakapapa, culture, and shared responsibility, grounded in te ao Māori values.
- Pacific whānau: Intergenerational families shaped by strong cultural, spiritual, and community ties, where collective care and respect guide wellbeing.

By honouring these differences and ensuring culturally safe, inclusive, and respectful practices, we can create safe spaces where all parents, caregivers, and tamariki feel acknowledged and supported.

You are not alone. Your whānau's identity, values, and stories are valid — and they are important foundations for healing, resilience, and hope.



A final note

By reading and using this guide, you've taken an important step in looking after yourself, your child and whānau. That takes strength, and it shows how deeply you care.

As a parent, you are one of the most important people in your child's life. Your love, presence, and effort — even in the face of challenges — can create strong foundations that support your child for years to come. Whether you're taking small steps or big ones, each moment of care and connection helps your child feel safe, seen, and deeply loved.

Understanding your own mental health and/or substance use challenges, and learning ways to support your child through them, is not always easy — but it can be powerful. It can help you build more trusting relationships, communicate more openly, and create a home where everyone can feel a sense of belonging. It also helps your child develop their own sense of wellbeing, resilience, and emotional safety.

This journey is not one you must walk alone. Reaching out, asking for support, and being kind to yourself are just as important as the care you give to others. You are doing something meaningful — not just for your child, but for yourself, your whānau, and future generations.

Your role as a parent is not just important — it's irreplaceable. With care, support, and time, you and your child can grow stronger together. This guide is just one step on the path, and wherever you are on your journey, you deserve to feel supported and valued.

How to get support

If you or your whānau are going through a tough time, you're not alone — and help is available.

Start by talking to your local health professional, GP, iwi health provider, or community health service. They can guide you to the right support and services in your area, including counselling, parenting support, addiction services, or help with housing, finances, or wellbeing.

Because services can vary a lot between regions, it's best to connect with someone who knows what's available locally. They can help you find the support that fits your needs — and your whānau's.

You'll also find national helplines and community services listed in this directory. These are free, confidential, and available to support you at any time — whether you need someone to talk to, information, or extra help.

Reaching out is a strong and positive step for you, your tamariki, and your wider whānau.

Support services and helplines

If you or someone in your whānau needs support, these free and confidential services are here to help:

Depression Helpline

Phone: 0800 111 757 or Text: 4202

Alcohol and Drug Helpline

Phone: 0800 787 797 or Text: 8681

Gambling Helpline

Phone: 0800 654 655 or Text: 8006

Specialist services available for Māori, Pasifika, youth, and debt-related concerns.

Suicide Crisis Helpline (TAUTOKO)

Phone: 0508 828 865

Available 24/7 for immediate support.

Youthline

Phone: 0800 376 633 or Text: 234

Free, confidential, and available 24/7 for young people and those supporting them.

Kidsline (up to 18 years old)

Phone: 0800 543 754

A free, confidential helpline for children and young people.

What's Up (for 5–18-year-olds)

Phone: 0800 942 8787 or Text: 5626

Free, confidential, and available 7 days a week from 11am to 11pm.

Carers NZ Helpline

Phone: 0800 777 797

Support for family carers, offering resources and information.

Rainbow & LGBTQIA+ Whānau Support Be There – InsideOUT Kōaro

Phone: 027 331 4507

Offers free workshops for parents and whānau of rainbow youth (trans, non-binary, takatāpui, queer, fa'afafine, and more).

RainbowYOUTH

Phone: (09) 376 4155

Offers 1:1 peer support to queer, gender diverse, intersex, and takatāpui youth and their whānau across Aotearoa.

Parent helplines

For information, counselling and support.

Parent Help

Phone: 0800 568 856

Parent Help offers free, confidential, and non-judgmental support for parents and caregivers. Their helpline is available daily from 9am to 9pm.

Family Services 211 Helpline

Phone: 0800 211 211

The 211 Helpline is a free, confidential service that connects individuals with local community-based health and social support services.

PlunketLine

Phone: 0800 933 922

A free, 24-hour helpline for parenting advice and support for families with tamariki under 5 years old

Parent to Parent

Phone: 0508 236 236

Parent to Parent offers support for families navigating experiences with disability

KidsLink

Phone: 0800 543 754

KidsLink is a free, nationwide service connecting families with local services for children and young people.

Useful websites

www.mentalhealth.org.nz

The Mental Health Foundation of NZ provides information, resources, advice on self-help, and a guide to where to get support.

depression.org.nz

Helping people find a way through depression.

thelowdown.co.nz

Support to help young people recognise and understand depression or anxiety.

depression.org.nz/get-help

An online programme to help people learn skills to tackle depression.

facebook.com/youngcarersnz

A national and support network for children and young people in caring roles.

familyservices.govt.nz/directory/

A directory of service providers for families or whānau.

grg.org.nz

Provides support services to grandparents who are raising their grandchildren on a full-time basis.

skylight.org.nz

A national not for profit trust that enables children, young people and their family or whānau to navigate through times of trauma loss and grief and difficult life situations.

[Kei Whea a Mauri Tau](#)

eBook for parents, teachers and therapists to read to tamariki aged six to eight years. Helping tamariki learn about connecting with themselves, others and the environment and to learn how to respond to their emotions.

[SPHC website](#)

emergingminds.com.au

Advancing infant, child and adolescent mental health.

insideout.org.nz

Offers free workshops for parents and whānau of rainbow youth (trans, non-binary, takatāpui, queer, fa'afafine, and more).

ry.org.nz

Offers 1:1 peer support to queer, gender diverse, intersex, and takatāpui youth and their whānau across Aotearoa.

Cultural contacts

Moana Vā – Navigators of Pacific Pride

- Website: moanava.org/

A community-led organisation providing support, advocacy, and mentorship to Pacific Rainbow+ MVPFAFF+ communities.

Mana Tipua

- Website: be-there.nz

Adhikaar Aotearoa – Spectrum of Colours

- Website: adhikaaraotearoa.co.nz

Provides resources to assist queer and transgender South Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand. The resource covers topics like celebrating diversity, navigating life, mental health, and sexual health. It's available in Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Sinhala, Tamil, and Urdu.

F'ine Pasifika Aotearoa

- Website: finepasifika.org.nz/

A Pasifika LGBTQI+/MVPFAFF+ focused charitable trust providing Whānau Ora navigational services. They offer support to Pasifika MVPFAFF/LGBTQI+ people and their families in the Auckland region.

Village Collective – Rainbow Fale

- Email: admin@villagecollective.nz
- Website: villagecollective.org.nz
- Address: 59 Druces Rd, Wiri 2104, Auckland

A Pasifika youth health and well-being support provider, running workshops in schools on relationships and consent. Their Rainbow Fale branch contributes to building supportive and safe environments for Pasifika Rainbow young people.

Toitu te Ao

- Phone: 0800 248 944
- Email: info@tetoimahana.org.nz
- Website: tetoimahana.org.nz
- Address: Level 7, 34 Manners Street, Te Aro, Wellington 6011

Uplifts the dignity of Māori living with HIV. They provide support and advocacy for Māori individuals affected by HIV.



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www.wharaurau.org.nz/all-workstreams/supporting-parents-health-children-sphc