



Having meaningful conversations with teenagers about parents with mental health and/or substance use challenges



When a parent experiences mental health and/or substance use challenges, teenagers may notice shifts in their mood and behaviour, even if it's not openly discussed.

This resource supports you in preparing for conversations with your teenager about your mental health, helping them gain a clearer understanding of what's going on. It covers:

- Recognising your thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- What your teenager notices and experiences
- Preparing to talk to your teenager

Key things to consider

When you gain a deeper understanding of your mental health and/or substance use challenges issue, you become more aware of how it affects your thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. This awareness can help you better understand the impact it has not only on you but also on your relationship with your teenager, allowing for a more compassionate and supportive connection.

Your thoughts, behaviour, and emotions shape not only how you perceive yourself but also how others, including your teenager, perceive you. These elements also play a significant role in the dynamics of your relationship with your teenager. A crucial first step in preparing to talk with your teenager about your mental health and/or substance use challenges is to reflect on your experiences, recognise the behaviours they witness, and understand how this impacts their feelings and perception of the situation.

Conversations with your teenager about your mental health and/or substance use challenges should aim to help them better understand and make sense of what is happening. If you need support in processing your own mental health and/or substance use challenges, it's important to reach out to a trusted adult, health professional, or peer worker. Your teenager is not the person to help you navigate or make sense of your mental health and/or substance use challenges.

As a parent, it can be challenging to think about how your teenager might view what's happening when you're experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges. It can be helpful to speak with a health professional or another support person about the impact of your mental health and/or substance use challenges on your role as a parent and how it may affect your relationship with your teenager.

A reflective moment

Try this activity on a day you are feeling well.

Reflect on the thoughts and feelings you experience, as well as the behaviours your teenager may observe.

Consider how these may impact them, and tick the symptoms and behaviours from the list below that align with your experience.

- ☐ Talking and moving slowly
 - ☐ Struggling to concentrate
 - ☐ Feeling numb
 - ☐ Worrying a lot
 - ☐ Seeing or hearing things
 - ☐ Very tired
 - ☐ Suspicious thoughts
 - ☐ Low motivation
 - ☐ Sleeping a lot
 - ☐ Traumatic flashbacks
 - ☐ Not mixing with others
 - ☐ Irritable, short-tempered
 - ☐ Sad or teary
 - ☐ Anxious
 - ☐ Angry outbursts
 - ☐ Over-sensitive
 - ☐ Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs
 - ☐ Suicidal thoughts
 - ☐ Self-harm
 - ☐ Restless

Are there any additional experiences you would like to add? Please list them below:

Select the five items from the list above that worry you most as a parent and write them underneath the heading 'My feelings and behaviour' below. Then, reflect on what your teenager might see, hear, and feel when observing you, and write your thoughts below 'What does my teenager see, hear and feel?'.

My feelings and behaviour:	My feelings and behaviour:	My feelings and behaviour:
What does my teenager see, hear, and feel?	What does my teenager see, hear, and feel?	What does my teenager see, hear, and feel?

My feelings and behaviour:

What does my teenager see, hear, and feel?

My feelings and behaviour:

What does my teenager see, hear, and feel?

Recognising what your teenager notices and experiences

Children of different ages will notice and react to your behaviour and emotions differently.

Parent-teenager relationships can be 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.

Teenagers can understand more complex information and are often better at expressing their feelings and thoughts compared to younger children. It's common for them to feel concerned about their parent's mental health, how it affects their relationship, and what it means for the future. They may have questions about your diagnosis, your path to recovery, and whether they

might also face similar mental health and/or substance use challenges. Additionally, teenagers may worry about how to talk about your mental health and/or substance use challenges with others, wanting to find a balance between being honest and respectful without feeling disloyal to you.

These concerns can deeply impact their emotional well-being, so it's important to approach these conversations with empathy and openness.



Preparing to talk with your teenager

Conversations with your teenager about your mental health and/or substance use challenges are important. These conversations help your teenager understand the family or whānau situation and make sense of what they are experiencing. When your teenager does not understand what is happening in the family or whānau they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand the situation. They may feel personally responsible, be worried about you and be worried about your health and safety.

Supporting your teenager in understanding mental health and/or substance use challenges and their impact on your family or whānau can:

- Encourage your teenager to feel comfortable talking about mental health.
- Support your teenager in asking questions and obtaining accurate information.
- Encourage them to reach out to you (or others) when they feel worried or overwhelmed.

Build an understanding that deepens and strengthens your relationship.

Reflecting on the items you previously listed:

- How are your thoughts, feelings, and behaviour affecting your teenager?
- What aspects of your behaviour seem most challenging for them?
- How might your mental health and/or substance use challenges impact your teenager's relationships and social activities?
- What aspects of your behaviour seem most challenging for them?



Inclusive mental health and/or challenges | Conversations across communities

When discussing mental health and/or substance use challenges across different cultural communities, it's important to respect unique values and experiences:

Tangata whaikaha (disabled people): Involve whānau and community for support.

Rainbow communities (LGBTQIA+): Create safe spaces for open, respectful dialogue.

Asian & other ethnic communities: Address stigma and use culturally sensitive language.

Pacific communities: Prioritise family and community support with respect for traditional values.

Māori communities: Emphasise holistic well-being, respect for whānau, and cultural principles.

Neurodiverse communities: Tailor conversations to individual needs, respecting different ways of processing emotions.

Refugee communities: Approach conversations with cultural sensitivity and awareness of trauma, creating safe spaces for trust and healing

Each group requires culturally sensitive, inclusive approaches to foster understanding and support.

Starting the conversation

You might start a conversation about your mental health and/or substance use challenges with:

- “You may have been worried about or noticed ” (Use the feelings and behaviours list above to get started.)
- “I want you to know I have a mental health and/or substance use challenge But you have not caused this and it’s not your fault”

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

- “What have you noticed about me?”
- “I am here to talk with you if you have any questions or are worried.”

You can then follow with:

- “If you feel you can’t come to me, you can talk to ”

An example of how you might start:

“You might have noticed I don’t seem to have much energy and I am always tired. Being tired is a symptom of my mental health and/or substance use challenge. 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.”

Write your own starting script here: Think about what you’d like to say to your teen in a simple, reassuring way.

Key things to consider

- Speak with your teenager in a way that feels comfortable for them, using simple language and pausing after sharing new information, allowing time for them to process.
- Encourage your teenager to ask questions and express their thoughts, ensuring they feel heard and supported, even if you’re unable to answer right away.
- Recognise that building understanding is a process – one conversation isn’t enough, and your teenager’s need for information will grow as they do.
- Create a supportive network for your teenager, where they can turn to trusted adults when you may not have the energy or capacity to answer their questions.
- While discussions may be brief, their significance is powerful. Often, the first conversation can feel overwhelming, but even small exchanges contribute to a growing sense of understanding. These ongoing conversations help strengthen the shared connection between you, your teenager, and your family or whānau over time.

Resources

- A range of free resources that can help you to talk with your child about your mental health and/or substance use challenges are available at the Emerging Minds website: emergingminds.com.au
- ‘About Mental health and/or substance use challenges - is a series of short video clips for young people by young people who have a parent with a mental health and/or substance use challenges’ issue: www.copmi.net.au/resources/about-mental-illness-videos-youth/
- ‘When your parent has a mental health and/or substance use challenges - a booklet for teenagers to help them better understand a parent’s mental health and/or substance use challenges. This can be ordered or viewed online at the COPMI website copmi.net.au/kids-young-people/getting-better/
- cph.co.nz/your-health/youth-mental-health
- healthify.nz/hauora-wellbeing/m/mental-health-issues-supporting-a-parent
- mentalhealth.org.nz/looking-after-yourself-and-your-family



Supporting Parents Healthy Children

Te tautoko i ngā mātua me ngā tamariki hauora

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

