



Talking to children about personality disorder

Caregivers often feel concerned that talking to children about personality disorder will scare or worry them. However, it may be a relief for children to learn that their caregiver's behaviour is part of an illness, and that it is not their fault.



Talking to children about personality disorder is a way to increase shared communication and understanding within the family. The following are some tips that may be helpful when talking with children about personality disorder.

- Encourage ongoing open discussion, as one conversation is often not enough
- Highlight the behaviours the child will have noticed in unwell caregivers, and explain that these are part of experiencing a personality disorder
- Consider protecting children from information they may find extremely distressing
- Ask children to share their worries and any other feelings
- Let the child know that they are allowed to ask questions any time
- Remind children they are not to blame, and it is not their responsibility to fix things
- Reassure children that while the caregiver is sometimes unwell that treatment is occurring
- Remind children that they are safe, loved and will be taken care of - and explain what will happen if a parent goes to hospital or becomes very unwell

- Discuss who children can talk to for extra support, e.g. family, friend or school counsellor
- Make a plan about how they can talk to other children (e.g. at school) about mental illness if they want to

It can be helpful to consider the developmental age of the child and to try to match the level of information provided to what they are able to understand and cope with emotionally. For example, for young children, using simple language to explain that sometimes the caregiver feels "sick" and sees a doctor to help them feel better, may be appropriate. Story books and toys can help to talk about fictional families in similar situations to explain personality disorder. However, older children, teenagers and young adults are often able to understand a greater depth of information about personality disorder. Providing some factual information and encouraging them to find facts on their own can be useful and empowering for older children.

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