

HOW DO I...

Help my child with difficult experiences such as parent mental or physical health concerns?

Advice for Parents and Caregivers

- **Dealing with something painful — like a parent’s mental or physical health — can weigh heavily on a child.** It’s important to continue an open line of communication, where they feel safe to ask questions or share their feelings. Bottling it up can lead to confusion and blame, making the situation even more difficult for both you and your child.
- **Family discussions are important in giving children age-appropriate information about what’s going on with their parent’s health.** It also helps them make sense of their experiences. Talking openly with your kids, even when things are tough, helps them understand what’s happening and feel supported.
- **It’s important to maintain a routine to provide your child with stability and comfort.** Try to keep their schedules as consistent as possible.



Scan to watch our
video on this topic.

8 Tips for Helping Kids When They Have a Mentally or Physically Ill Parent

To learn more, check out these helpful resources:

[Parenting Through Illness](#)
UC Davis Health Children's Hospital

[When a Parent Has Mental Illness, How to Support Kids](#)
Boston Children's Hospital

[Supporting Children When Someone They Love Has a Serious Illness](#)
Hospice of Santa Cruz County

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments.

1. **Be transparent.** Kids are incredibly perceptive and will sense that something is going on, so it's best to be open and honest. Explain in an age-appropriate way what the parent is experiencing and what the child can expect in the weeks and months to come.
2. **Check in often.** Ongoing illness requires ongoing conversations, so continue to check in with your children often — both to keep them in the loop and to create space for their feelings.
3. **Reassure them.** Let your child know about all the steps being taken to treat the illness and emphasize that it's not their fault or their responsibility to fix it. Remind them that they are loved.
4. **Normalize mental and physical disorders.** Share that many people will struggle with their mental or physical health at some point and that there are excellent resources, treatments, and supports available.
5. **Encourage questions.** Let your kids know that they can come to you with any questions or concerns. If you don't have the answers, you can tell them you don't know, or work to find them together.
6. **Maintain routines.** There is comfort in predictable routines, so as much as possible try to keep the kids' schedules consistent. This may help give them a sense of control.
7. **Watch for signs of distress.** Kids will process information about parental diagnoses differently, and it may change over time. Keep an eye out for signs of anxiety or depression such as trouble sleeping or eating, increased irritability, separation anxiety, and loss of interest in preferred activities.
8. **Consult professionals.** When in doubt, it never hurts to bring in experts. You can collaborate with your children's school to provide resources or help your kids connect with a therapist who can support them in processing their emotions. Look for community resources, like support groups or the child life departments at hospitals that work specifically to help kids through difficult experiences like this.