

Introduction

If you have a brother or sister with a mental illness, this fact sheet is for you. One in four people will experience a mental illness at some point in their life (Beyond Blue 2010). These illnesses vary from the more common depression and anxiety, through to psychotic illnesses such as Schizophrenia.

The experience of having a brother or sister with a mental illness is different for everyone. It is a complex journey and you may experience a mix of reactions and feelings. You may be confused by what is happening in your family and feel unsure about what role you should play. While much attention needs to be focussed on your brother or sister, you may face difficulties yourself. With so much going on you may not realise that you are experiencing stress and that this may affect your health. Stress can show up in a number of ways, including: sleeping troubles, change in appetite, headaches, difficulty concentrating, or withdrawing from family and friends.

This fact sheet outlines the common concerns of siblings and what you can do to ensure you gain the support you need. While siblings do speak about the challenges they face, many acknowledge the personal growth that is possible. Some siblings believe that the experience has made them more empathic and tolerant of others and has led to important changes in their own lives.

What Siblings Say

No one understands what I'm going through

I'm worried about my sister

My brother is so selfish I feel like I have to walk on eggshells around him

My parents are so focused on my sister's mental health that they do not have any time or energy for me

I don't understand what my brother's diagnosis means

I'm embarrassed by her sometimes

Our family is secretive about my brother's mental health

Common Concerns

Your family relationships

The pressure put on families who are supporting someone with a mental illness can be immense. It can be difficult to talk to each other openly when there is so much stress and emotion. Families often have difficult decisions to make on behalf of the person with a mental illness. This can cause strain and conflict if individual family members have different opinions about what is in the best interests of the person with the mental illness.

Your feelings

Having a brother or sister with a mental illness can be an emotional experience. Siblings sometimes report feeling relieved when their brother or sister receives a diagnosis. Having a diagnosis can help to explain behaviour that had previously been considered to be deliberate or defiant. For others, however, gaining a diagnosis may be a very scary time. Feelings of grief and loss are common for siblings of people with a mental illness. There is the grief for the person with the illness, for your parents, for yourself as well as the change in relationship with your sibling.

Feelings of losing the sibling to the illness, or wishing for a 'normal' sibling are not uncommon. You may feel some resentment and then feel guilty about

those feelings. You may love and care about your brother or sister but still feel angry about the situation. It's important to acknowledge your emotions and to give yourself permission to feel the way that you do. There is no 'right' way to respond.

Your social life

You may find that your social life is impacted. Your responsibilities to your brother or sister and family may take up a lot of your time. You may not spend as much time with friends due to stress, or you may feel obligated to socialise with your sibling if they are isolated. It can also be hard to talk to friends about your experience. You may feel that friends cannot understand your brother or sister's mental illness, or their behaviour and, as a result, you may feel uncomfortable having friends over to your house.

Signs of stress

With so much going on, you may not notice that you are becoming stressed. Ongoing stress may affect your health. It can show up in a number of ways, including:

- Sleeping troubles
- Change in appetite
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Withdrawal from friends and family.

It is important to be able to identify signs of stress and to manage your stress.

Strategies

Even though your brother or sister may need lots of support, your needs are important too. Here are some ideas to help you to look after yourself.

Self care

- Eating well
- Exercise
- Relaxation

This might seem obvious, but eating well and getting regular exercise are really important. A balanced diet ensures that you are getting the nourishment you need and can improve your overall wellbeing. Regular exercise helps to reduce stress by releasing tension stored in your muscles.

Taking time out to relax is really important too. People choose to do this in different ways. Maintaining hobbies, taking time out to socialise with friends and making time for yourself, all help to keep things in perspective. Yoga, meditation, or listening to music may be helpful.

Information

Try to learn as much as you can about your brother or sister's diagnosis, and the treatment process. The mental health team who are involved with your brother or sister may include you in discussions about what treatment is planned and what role you can play in that process. There may be some things that they cannot discuss with you due to confidentiality.

Talking with your family

Try to talk with your family about what is happening. Although it can be difficult to talk about emotional issues, many families become closer through sharing their thoughts and feelings. Try to understand other family members' perspectives; you will all be affected in different ways, and experience a range of feelings. Sometimes the mental health team will be able to help you work through these together.

Your role

It can be difficult working out how involved you would like to be in supporting your brother or sister. You may want to have a significant caring role, but it is important to set clear boundaries about what is ok for you. Try to recognise the difference between things that are within your control (e.g., going along to appointments with your brother or sister) and things that are not (your brother or sister's symptoms). Sometimes, being just a brother or sister, and focussing on sharing some fun activities, can be of more benefit than taking on a 'carer' role.

Seeking help

You may be very concerned about your brother or sister, but it is ok for you to ask for help for yourself too. Seeking help and support from others is an important part of looking after yourself. This can mean spending time with close friends and family, or seeking professional help. It can be useful to talk to a professional about how you are feeling. If you wish

to talk to a mental health professional about your own concerns you can seek a referral from your GP. If you are a student, your school or university counsellor may be able to help. Sometimes it can help to have contact with other siblings or to read books by, or for, siblings. The Siblings Australia website has a number of resources.

Responding in a crisis

It can really help if your family has a plan in place for a crisis. If your brother or sister is involved with a mental health team, or a mental health clinician, they will be able to provide you with a safety plan. It is important to familiarise yourself with the Mental Health Triage number (in SA it is 131465), or to call 000 if the situation is life-threatening.

Helpful Contacts

Kids Helpline
1800 551 800

Lifeline
13 11 14

Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Black Dog
www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of
Australia (MIFA)
www.mifa.org.au

Reachout!
<http://au.reachout.com>

Early Psychosis Prevention and
Intervention Centre (EPPIC)
www.eppic.org.au

It's all right (SANE)
itsallright.org

*For further information please contact Centacare's
Navigate program on 8159 1400 or Siblings Australia*



Statement regarding the traditional owners of the land.

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have walked on this land, in their country. Their relationship with the land is at the centre of their lives. We acknowledge the Aboriginal people and their stewardship and spiritual connection with their lands.