



Responding to whānau and children in times of acute mental distress

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The Supporting Parents Healthy Children (SPHC) guidelines require the New Zealand mental health and addiction adult workforce to broaden their outlook beyond the person they are working with, and respond to the needs of their children and whānau. <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/supporting-parents-healthy-children>

Whānau

When someone is overwhelmed with mental distress, adult partners, parents or siblings often find themselves advocating for their whānau member to access professional help. Whānau needs can be put to one side as they understandably prioritise the support needs of the person they care about. This can sometimes affect their ability to be usefully available in a calm, supportive manner. Nurses and other mental health professionals can help facilitate a sense of emotional self-regulation for the whānau through empathetic communication and face-to-face meetings. This can be further enhanced by continuity of staff which is a core feature of the open dialogue approach. Whānau also appreciate staff passing on relevant written information like the Mental Health Foundation resource 'Are you worried someone is thinking of suicide?' <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/ResourceFinder/worried-about-someone.pdf>

Children

Children and their needs as dependents or siblings can be overlooked during periods of acute distress. The way in which a child could experience this is by internalising responsibility for what their parent is going through, as if it is somehow their fault. This is more likely when explanations are not given or questions go unanswered. Through some simple actions, mental health professionals in partnership with the parent and their whānau can make a positive difference for children when their parent or older sibling is in acute mental distress. Helpful guidance from the Australian COPMI site is listed below in italics.

<http://www.copmi.net.au/family-friends/helping-the-child>

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<https://www.tepou.co.nz/news/responding-to-whanau-and-children-in-times-of-acute-mental-distress/1012>

Children and young people cope better during a crisis if:

- ❖ *they understand what is happening*
- ❖ *they know they are not to blame*
- ❖ *their routines continue (such as school and after-school activities)*
- ❖ *they know who will look after them if their parent cannot (and how they will stay connected with their parent)*
- ❖ *they have a reliable adult to talk to about their feelings.*

You'll need to consider the young person's age and ability to understand information. Even very young children can gain some understanding of what's going on, if told 'mummy's not well, you've done nothing wrong and she's getting help so she can get better.'

It is also important to keep parents informed and directing the process as much as is possible. Ask parents what particular things they might want communicated to their children when they are unwell – so there are no mixed messages.

Here is a [practical resource from the SPHC website](#) which supports parents in talking to their children.

In some situations a family care plan can be a useful reference point for everyone concerned (if it is ever required). These outline the parent's wishes for caregiving arrangements if they are temporarily unable to care for their children. A family care plan template is available on the SPHC website.

<http://www.werryworkforce.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/SPHC/Plan%20for%20Caring%20for%20Children.pdf>

Most DHB family whānau advisors are involved in supporting the implementation of the Supporting Parents Healthy Children guidelines. Many of us have lived whānau-experience relevant to this initiative - either growing up with a parent who experienced mental health and/or addiction problems, as a parent themselves with mental health and/or addiction issues or as a partner to someone with mental health and/or addiction problems. We look forward to supporting the mental health and addiction workforce in their response to the needs of children, parents and whānau.

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