

you are not alone.

23% of American adults were diagnosed with a mental disorder (including addictions) in the past year, and almost half are parents. Five percent of the population has a mental disorder that interferes with their daily life. There are over 200 forms of mental illness; the most common are alcohol and drug addiction, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders such as depression. The illness is usually physical as well as emotional, and causes changes in thinking, mood, behavior and loss of functioning.

Many people with mental illness continue to successfully parent their children and learn to cope and recover from their disorder. Recovery is possible and, with treatment, you can have a fulfilling life.

For more information and help:

- **Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers Association**
1-800-887-6422
www.pmhca.org
- **National Mental Health Association**
1-800-969-6642
www.nmha.org
- **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill**
1-800-950-6264
<http://www.namipa.nami.org>
- **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance**
1-800-826-3632
www.dbsalliance.org
- **National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression**
1-800-829-8289
www.narsad.org



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parenting with
hope & health

HELP FOR PARENTS
WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

PARENTING SERIES

if you have mental illness and are a parent:

You may feel isolated and alone. Maybe you feel that you will never be able to be a good parent, or you feel guilty for not being the kind of parent you want to be. Perhaps you have been away from your children because of hospitalizations. Please remember:

- **Your illness is not your fault.** It did not happen because you are a bad person. While no one knows exactly how we develop mental illnesses, the brain chemistry of the mentally ill person is different than others. Genetics also play a role in who becomes mentally ill. Don't waste energy blaming yourself, your childhood or your life situation; spend energy getting the help you need.
 - **Learn as much as you can about your illness.** Ask your doctor, counselor or case manager questions about how this illness develops, its symptoms and treatments. There are many good websites for information; the back of this brochure lists some that may be helpful to you. Check with your local library for more information.
 - **Take care of yourself!** The best thing you can do for your children is to keep yourself healthy. Stay away from alcohol and other drugs, eat a healthy diet and get some exercise each day. Pay attention to the amount of sleep you get each day. Don't isolate yourself; arrange to have time away from your children and make friends in your neighborhood.
 - **Follow your treatment plan.** Make sure you understand your medication, its side effects and how long it will take to work. Don't stop taking medication when you feel better, and never change the amount or type of drug you take without talking to your doctor first. Keep your appointments for therapy and participate in counseling sessions.
 - **Find out what your rights as a mental health services consumer are.** Get as much information from doctors or hospitals as you can; ask questions so you can make the best decisions about your care. Ask a friend or family member for help if you need it.
 - **Get support from others.** Talk to people who are in a similar situation as you. In addition to a parenting or family support program, mental health support groups meet in many communities, and can help you connect with others.
 - **Don't give up.** Mental illnesses are among the most treatable. Medication and therapy can help you feel better and take better care of your children. There is hope, and help is available.
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being the best parent you can:

Having a mental illness does not have to mean you stop parenting. You may have to make changes in your home and family life to deal with the illness, but you *can* be a good parent. Here are some ideas:

- **Help your children learn about your illness.** Give them information geared to their ages. Reading a book about the illness can help them understand, and support groups for children give them a chance to talk to other kids. Explain that you are getting treatment and expect to get better.
 - **Reassure your children that the illness is not their fault.** Many children feel that whatever happens is linked to something they did. Tell them – often – that they are not to blame.
 - **Talk about emotions with your child, and get counseling help for them if they need it.** Sometimes children feel angry because their parent is different or because mental health problems can take away time and energy from your family. Many children are embarrassed by their parent's illness or behavior and hide their feelings of shame and guilt.
 - **Provide a stable and consistent home for your children.** Do everything you can to have regular meals and bedtimes. Make sure they go to school every day, and have clean clothes to wear. Ask a family member or friend to help you with household jobs if you are ill.
 - **Play with your children.** Everyone needs to play and laugh. If this is not easy for you, follow your child's lead. Set aside time to connect with your children each day, talk about their day at school. Most important – relax!
 - **Avoid giving your children adult roles.** Children often become caretakers of parents and younger children because of the illness. Look to other adults, health care providers and friends for support in helping your children be children.
 - **Encourage your children to be involved with other children and their families.** Sometimes a parent's mental illness creates a stigma for kids, and other children may tease them. They will "fit in" better if they can develop friendships with families who will encourage and support them.
 - **Develop a network of support for your family.** Both you and your child need people you can count on for help when you are ill. Ask a family member, neighbor, clergy person or other parent if they are willing to be part of your "crisis plan." Keep their numbers in a safe place and teach your child how to call them if you need help.
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