When a Parent Has a Mental Illness:

HEREDITY & MENTAL ILLNESS

Scientific evidence shows many medical conditions are hereditary. Similar evidence exists about mental illness. One in five adults has a mental illness. Usually the symptoms of the illness start between 15 and 25 years of age. This age range is often before parenthood. And in some people, the symptoms start after adults become parents.

Will you develop mental illness because your father suffers from depression? Will you have schizophrenia because a cousin has it?

Your risk for mental illness does increase if a family member has a mental disorder, but this heightened percentage is no guarantee you will develop mental illness.

Facts to know:

- Up to 90% of people diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder have a family member who suffers from depression.

- An identical twin whose sibling develops schizophrenia has a 50 – 60% chance of developing the disorder too. If one parent has schizophrenia the child has an 18% chance of developing the disorder.

- Children of mothers experiencing Clinical Depression have a 20% risk of depression compared to 10% for children of never depressed mothers.

Growing up in any family is challenging. Any household where a parent has a chronic mental illness will present similar problems to those homes where a parent has a chronic medical condition.

- Often role reversal occurs where children become the caregiver for the parent.

- Children often take on household management responsibilities.

- Older children often become caregivers for younger siblings.

- Children often do not receive parental nurturing needed for good development.

- Children are often embarrassed by their household situation.
Discussing Your Mental Illness with Your Children

Children are very aware of their surroundings and therefore, are very much aware their parent may be ill. It is important to discuss the parent’s illness with the child. A child’s main concern is how his or her life will be affected. The older the child, the more they can be told.

- Children need to know that mental illness is real, mental illness is diagnosable, and most of all, mental illness is treatable.
- Children need to know a parent goes to the doctor for the same reasons a child sees the doctor.
- Children need to know parents may take medications to help them feel better.
- Children need to know they did not cause their parent’s mental illness.
- Parents with mental illness love their children.

Age Appropriate Topics for Children of Parents with Mental Illness

Under 6: Tell the child the parent sees the doctor or takes medication to feel better.

Ages 7 – 10: Tell the children that the parent’s illness sometimes affects their thinking and shows up in their behavior. Tell the children the parent does not behave this way on purpose and that medication and other treatment helps the parent.

Ages 11 – 13: Answer questions from this age group as fully as possible. Address the child’s curiosity, fears, anger and confusion openly to help them understand they are not alone nor are they the cause of their parent’s illness.

Supported by a grant from the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities.

The Mental Health Association offers equally all services to eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin or disability.

Please contact the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee for more information at 865-584-9125.