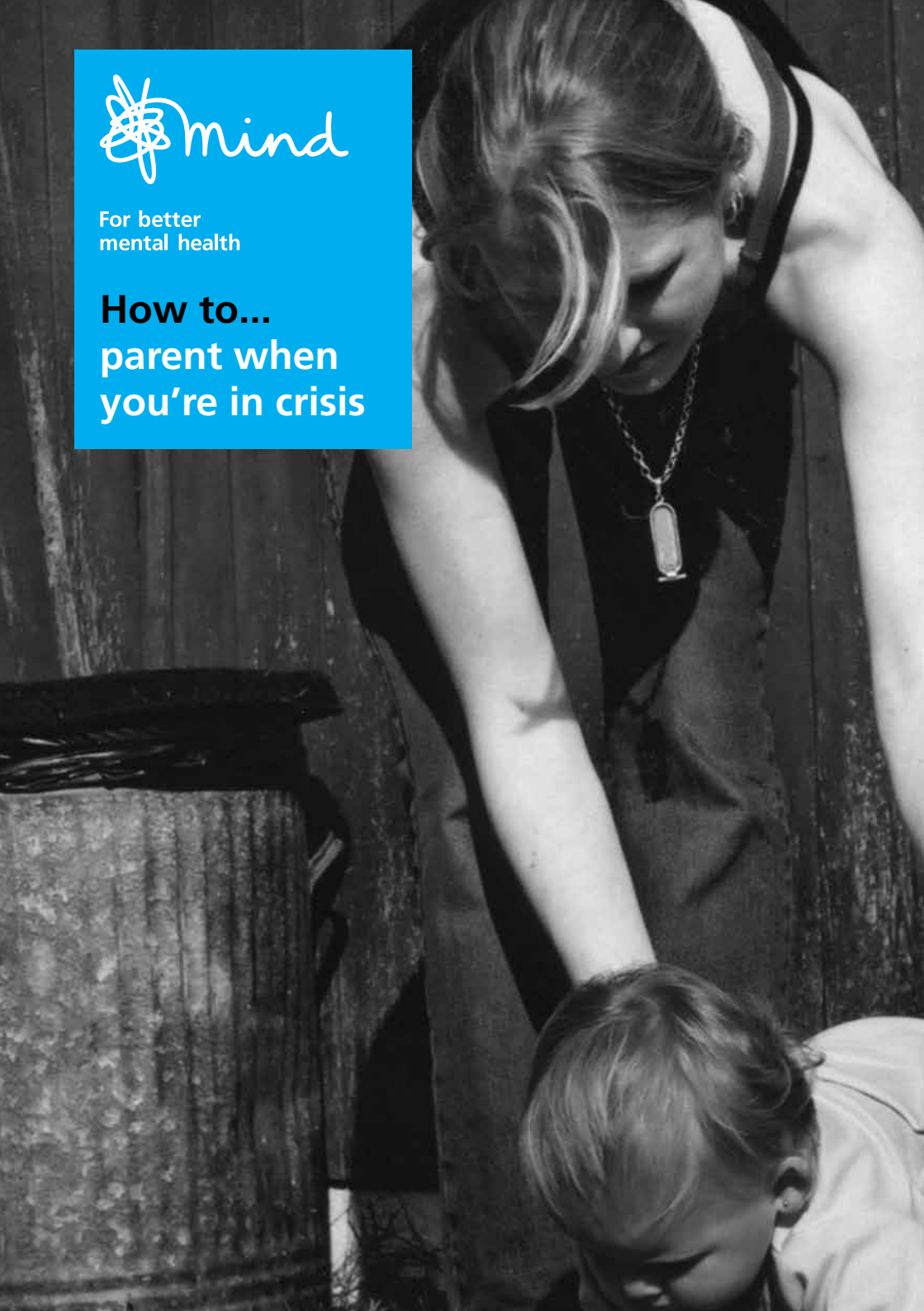




For better
mental health

How to... **parent when** **you're in crisis**



How to... parent when you're in a crisis



"I just wasn't coping and the problems were mounting up. I couldn't work, and we were getting into debt. I thought I must be a terrible mother – I couldn't even look after myself, let alone my daughter. I don't know how we managed."

This booklet aims to help parents who experience mental health problems to avoid reaching crisis point. It looks at some of the problems that can arise for parents and children, and suggests strategies for overcoming them. It also explains how you and your family can get further support and assistance, should you want to.



Why do parents reach crisis point?

The pressures of modern life place enormous demands on families. We are bombarded with images of 'model' families – happy, healthy and well off – adding to the pressure to be perfect parents. The reality maybe very different for you if you're continually trying to balance the demands of a complicated life while trying to ensure the wellbeing of your children. This responsibility can seem overwhelming, especially when you are under additional stress from mental health problems or other significant life events, such as bereavement, divorce, unemployment and debt, poor housing, domestic abuse and ill health.

Sometimes, it may not seem clear whether your emotional distress is causing a crisis in the family, or whether problems affecting the family are causing your distress. What is clear, and what matters, is that each makes the other worse. Guilt or blame are not helpful and will only make the situation harder for everyone.

Relationships

Relationships are important to the wellbeing of families. During times of difficulty, they can come under strain. It could be that you feel your partner is not being supportive or understanding, or that your partner feels overburdened and resentful. If you are a single parent you may not have another adult in the house to provide extra support when needed. Divorce and separation bring additional challenges for families with children, including sharing responsibilities, financial issues and access.

New parents

Adapting to a new baby can change your life and place a great deal of strain on relationships. The demands on new parents can seem overwhelming. If you, or your partner, have already experienced mental health problems, this may have already dented your self-confidence. Well-meaning relatives and professionals may offer 'help' in a way that can undermine you further. It's important to bear in mind that it's perfectly natural for first-time parents to doubt their ability to cope.

Sometimes having a baby can trigger an episode of mental distress. If you are pregnant or thinking of having a baby and have had mental health problems before, it may be sensible to talk to your GP or a mental health professional about this and plan ahead if necessary.

Also, if someone has recently given birth and is feeling very low or anxious all the time, they may be suffering from postnatal depression or the 'baby blues'. If this is how you or your partner feel, talk to your health visitor or GP, so that they can help you through this. (See Mind's booklet *Understanding postnatal depression*.)

How to... parent when you're in a crisis

Children and teenagers

As children get older, they can understand more about what is happening and can take more responsibility within the family. If a parent seems to be having problems, sometimes a child becomes overburdened, emotionally and practically, within the home. And if they do not understand what's happening, this can lead to anxiety or even behaviour problems, such as truancy or angry outbursts. Children can feel worried or overlooked and may be reluctant to raise their concerns for fear of making things worse. Teenagers are likely to be struggling with their own problems, such as exams, relationships, and self-identity, and may feel or even resent the impact of parental problems as much as younger children.



How can I get the help I need?

Mental and emotional health

There are many ways to cope with emotional crises or episodes of mental ill health; how people manage depends on individual needs and choices as well as the type of problems involved. (Information about particular mental health problems can be found in Mind's wide range of booklets – see p. 19.)

Talk to your GP, or mental health professional if you have one, about your options. This could be a talking therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling or psychotherapy (including family therapy), community support, specialist mental health services, and medication, if appropriate.

You may find alternative approaches helpful, such as physical exercise, diet and complementary therapies. You could also consult self-help books or join online communities that provide advice and support.

Putting time and effort into looking after your own mental health will make it easier to look after your children, and will benefit you all. It would probably be helpful to talk to your partner, or someone close to you, about a way forward so that you are working together and have support.

Practical help

It may be that you need some practical help to cope with the issues you are facing, and there are many national and local services offering help with various aspects of family life. The first step is to find out what is available.

You could discuss this with your GP, health visitor or mental health professional. Or you could approach a local or national advice organisation, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, to either advise you or signpost you to relevant organisations; for example, if you have financial or housing problems. You could also contact your local authority (council) or look on the internet. The DirectGov website is a useful 'one stop shop' guide to public services (see 'Useful websites' on p. 18).

Most areas have an advocacy service which may be able to help you investigate various options if you need support for this.

What help am I entitled to?

Children's services

Some families may be entitled to specific help depending on their needs and circumstances. If you think your child may be experiencing distress because the family is in crisis, you can ask the local authority to make an assessment of their needs.



How to... parent when you're in a crisis

The Children's Act 2004 emphasises that the best way of helping children is to support the family as a whole. Local authorities have a duty to promote the welfare of 'children in need' and to provide family support. Anyone looking after a child under 18 (or the child themselves) can ask for an assessment which has to take account of a child's race, religion, culture and language.

"Healthcare professionals placed a strong feature on parenting to make sure my son and I stayed together and weren't separated."

Local children's services should make a plan with both parents and children to address their needs. This can include a wide range of help such as support with household tasks, parenting skills, counselling, advice, cash and equipment. It could also include providing day-care, by arranging a childminder or a nursery and, for older children, supervised youth clubs or outings.

Your family may not be eligible for help from children's services, or you may have to pay for some of the help you receive, depending on your financial situation. You may prefer to organise your own help and support, if you feel you want more control of the situation and can afford it.

Community care legislation

Your family may also be entitled to receive help through community care legislation if you are disabled and have difficulty undertaking day-to-day activities, which can include parenting. Increasing use is being made of Direct Payments where disabled people (including those with mental health problems) with identified social care needs can hold the budget themselves and so buy the care that is most appropriate to them. If you are disabled, public services have to make sure their services are accessible to you and if you think you are being discriminated against, you could seek advice about this.

Care Programme Approach

If your mental health needs are managed through the Care Programme Approach (CPA), any needs you may have as a parent should be considered as part of this. The needs of your children should also be fully assessed. Discuss this further with your care co-ordinator if you feel this is relevant to your circumstances.

Your employer

If you work, you could talk to your employer (or the occupational health department if there is one) about possible support you may need in the work place. The Equalities Act 2010 may be relevant; for example, your employer is required to make 'reasonable adjustments' if you have a disability. If you are signed off sick by your GP you will probably be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. You may also be entitled to other financial help such as benefits or interest-free loans.

How can I get myself through a crisis?



Ask for help

Deciding to manage a difficult situation is important, but can be daunting. Simply asking for help can be a big step. Talking things over with your partner or other family member or friend can help you focus on what to do and provide you with support. The answers to problems may not be immediately obvious and may well become clearer over time, especially if you are not well at the moment.

Troubleshoot

You may have one or more significant problems that are making you very anxious. Leaving them unresolved is likely to cause ongoing distress. They could be the cause or result of your crisis, or just coincidental. Write down the things that are worrying

How to...

parent when you're in a crisis

you, however small, and then jot down possible solutions to each problem, even if you're not clear exactly how to achieve them. Think about who might be able to help you with a particular solution. It could be an individual or an organisation.

Prioritise

Write down a list of tasks you need to complete. Decide which ones are urgent or important. Cross the rest off or, if you can't bear to do this, put them on hold. Focus on ways to accomplish those left on your list.

Think of alternatives

Of the things you feel you must do, try to think of other ways to achieve your goals. It may be by using more frozen or tinned food than usual, and keeping housework to a minimum. Maybe you could employ a cleaner for a couple of hours a week. Perhaps your children could do something extra for themselves. Could a friend or relative have the children for a couple of nights? Maybe a local handyman could come in and fix all the small jobs that need doing. If you are short of money you could offer to swap skills or time as 'payment'.

Structure your day

Divide your day into morning, afternoon and evening, putting in the essential daily activities such as cooking dinner or bathing the children. You could also add one or two of the urgent things from your list above, taking into account when you are likely to be at your best during the day. Be realistic and set yourself achievable goals or tasks to encourage you. Doing the washing or going to the shops can be significant achievements when you are not well.

Make time for your children

Try to make some time each day that is just for you and your children. This could be part of a routine such as during a meal or snuggling up in front of the TV or a DVD. You may want to have particular activities such as playing a game, drawing, reading a book or baking. Make a point of asking them about aspects of their day or their opinions. Children often have passionate interests and would be happy to tell you about these at great length. If there are some big decisions to be made, make sure children know what's happening and feel involved.

Make time for yourself

Make sure you have some time for yourself or for you and your partner during the day. It is easy to overlook this when you are a parent. Spending time on something you enjoy such as a soak in the bath, going for a run, watching a film, listening to music or going to the pub, can relax (both of) you and enrich your quality of life.

Create a support system for you and your family

Most people have some sort of informal support network of relatives, friends, neighbours or colleagues. They may be able to support you emotionally by providing a sympathetic ear. Or they could provide practical assistance by taking the children out or doing the shopping. If people offer help and you feel comfortable with it, accept the offer. People generally like to help out as long as they are not taken advantage of.

You could also attend a drop-in centre or support group, once or twice a week, or arrange for some counselling or psychotherapy sessions. (See 'Useful organisations'). Some people find support through the internet and even set up a support groups for others in similar situations.

How to...

parent when you're in a crisis



How else can I prepare in case there's a crisis?

Try not to succumb to guilty feelings about the effect you could be having on your family. It's a waste of energy and will not help matters. Have a clear strategy for when you feel particularly distressed; for example, calling a friend or the Samaritans, writing down your worries, listening to some relaxing music or doing an exercise routine.

If you have experienced more than one period of mental ill health for any length of time, it's worth working out a plan of action, together with anyone involved with your care, in case you should start to become unwell. This could involve your partner, friends and relatives as well as professionals, such as your doctor or social worker. Within this plan, you can draw up strategies for coping with both your emotional distress and your everyday life. Include your children in the discussions, so they know what to do and what might happen if you become unwell. Make sure you are positive and reassuring, and encourage your children to ask questions and voice their concerns. This will help equip them should a crisis occur. You could draw up a list of essential activities for each day of the week so that someone else (and your children) will know what needs doing.

"I had a customised advanced statement. I had a list of people willing to take [my son] and a plan to make sure the essentials like going to school, doing homework and being fed happened."

How can I help my children to cope?



Children can be surprisingly resilient, but it's usually best to be honest and explain things to them. Even very young children have the concept of mummy or daddy being sad or not well. Sometimes, children keep quiet about what's bothering them, especially if they are afraid of upsetting their parents. Give them time and space to talk to you about their concerns or questions.

"We have always spoken about our mental health difficulties with our children in a way they could understand. They are very caring and accepting of 'difference' in a way many young people aren't. We are very proud of them."

More than anything, reassure them that it's not their fault, and that you are going to get better. It's important that your children feel loved and safe. Simply hugging and telling them how much you love them will help them feel happy and secure. Spend time just being with your children in a way that's not too demanding for you. You could watch a film and eat pizza, or go for a walk in the park.

Keeping to routine as much as possible is also reassuring for children. This could be a particular focus in the support arrangements for you and your family.

Getting appropriate help

If you feel your relationship with your children is suffering, you might consider some extra support and help. With your child's agreement, if possible, you or someone you both trust could approach an appropriate service, such as a counselling service for young people. Another option could be a service aimed at supporting families in difficulties. This could be a specialised

How to...

parent when you're in a crisis

service run by mental health services or a more general project, maybe run by a voluntary agency. If your child is experiencing significant emotional distress or their behaviour is causing concern, you could ask your GP or mental health professional about some more specialist help for them, for example, from a clinical psychologist.

Your health visitor can be an important source of support, particularly for help with children under five. They can visit you at home and offer advice on any problems you may be having. They can also tell you about other help or support in your area, such as parent and toddler groups or playgroups. If you don't already have a health visitor, your GP can put you in touch with one.

Talking to the school

Schools appreciate knowing if children are having problems at home that might be affecting schoolwork or behaviour, so that they can take this into account. If you are thinking of talking to the school, try to get your child's agreement first. They may have a preferred teacher who they particularly trust. Or there may be a nurse attached to the school who may be an acceptable alternative, especially for older children who could be reluctant for you to contact the school.

Children as carers

Some children take on the role of carer for their parent. If this is happening, it might be time to ask social services for practical help with the housework or cooking, for example, so that your child is not overburdened (also see 'What help am I entitled to?' on p. 5).

What happens if I have to go into hospital?



Very occasionally, a parent becomes too unwell to look after their children or even themselves. Going into hospital or having your children looked after should be seen as a positive step towards getting yourself well and back to normal. Often partners or other family members will look after your children while you're in hospital. If this is not possible, social services will make appropriate arrangements (see 'Voluntary agreement' on p. 14). Some families make regular use of foster carers to cope with or prevent a major crisis.

If you are admitted to hospital, your children will normally be free to visit you. Ask about a dedicated room for these visits, so that your children do not have to come on the ward itself. While you are in hospital, your needs as a parent should be taken into account as part of your care plan or CPA, and will be particularly important when you're preparing for discharge from hospital. It may be helpful if your children have some involvement in your discharge planning. You could discuss this with a member of staff.

If you feel your needs as a parent are not being addressed adequately, it may be worth contacting the hospital's advocacy service, which can help put your views forward or put you in contact with the appropriate help and support (see *The Mind guide to advocacy*).

How to...

parent when you're in a crisis



Can my children be taken into care?

It may be a great worry to parents who are already in emotional distress that they will be seen as unfit parents and their children taken away. This fear sometimes stops families asking for the help they need and are entitled to. But only very occasionally is a child taken into the care of the local authority, and this is a last resort. The primary concern of social services is the welfare of the child. They recognise that it is usually best to support the family and keep it together, rather than removing the child, which could be very traumatic for everyone. Sometimes it may be helpful for both parent and child if the child is looked after by someone else for a while. This can be arranged with family or friends or it could be something that your social worker arranges with you.

"As I've been sectioned, I worried for a long time that my daughter would be taken into care. I felt some professionals were waiting for me to fail. When my GP described my husband and me as 'excellent parents', my anxiety reduced; although I still feel distrustful at times."

Voluntary agreement

If you and your social worker should feel that the crisis is such that your child would be better off living away from home for a while, the local authority can look after your child under a voluntary arrangement with you (and your partner, if relevant). Your child could be placed with relatives or friends, with foster parents or in appropriate high standard accommodation; for example, if your child has a disability.

Your local authority must find out the views and wishes of you and your child and take these into account when considering the placement. Placements have to be as near to home as

possible and, if more than one of your children is being looked after, they should be kept together, as a rule. The local authority must ensure that a good standard of care is provided.

Exceptional circumstances

In exceptional cases, when there is serious concern for the welfare of the child, a Child Protection Conference may be called. This is a meeting set up by social services and involves other people, such as doctors, teachers, health visitors and the police. Parents will be involved and are usually invited to attend the conference.

You can bring to the conference a friend or advocate, who could speak for you if you like, and you are entitled to legal assistance. It is a good idea to find out about your rights and what options are available to you (consult Mind's Legal Advice Service for advice and information.) There are a number of possible outcomes from this meeting, including a decision to carry out an assessment if more information is needed for example.

Are people with mental health issues bad parents?

The majority of people with mental health problems are excellent parents. Many parents feel that their children grow up to be sensitive, caring and responsible adults.



Occasionally parents who are experiencing emotional distress have negative feelings about their children, for example, not enjoying spending time with them. If this is happening, it is important to tell your partner and health care professionals so they can help you through this.

How to... parent when you're in a crisis

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

web: www.mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

The Association for Post Natal Illness

tel: 020 7386 0868

web: www.apni.org

Advice and support to women suffering from postnatal depression

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

tel: 01455 883 300

web: www.bacp.co.uk

Information and advice and a directory of therapists

Citizens Advice Bureau

advice lines: (England): 08444 111 444 and

(Wales): 0844 477 2020

web: www.citizensadvice.org.uk – to find your local branch and

www.adviceguide.org.uk – online information and advice

Information and advice on a wide range of issues

Equality and Human Rights Commission

advice lines: (England) 0845 604 6610 and

(Wales) 0845 604 8810

web: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Information and advice on equality and rights issues

Families Need Fathers

helpline: 0300 0300 363

web: www.fnf.org.uk

Information and advice for all members of the family

Family Lives

24-hour helpline (Parentline Plus): 0808 800 2222

web: www.familylives.org.uk

Information and support for parents and families

Family Rights Group

helpline: 0808 801 0366

web: www.frg.org.uk

Support for families whose children are involved with social services

Gingerbread

helpline: 0808 802 0925

web: www.gingerbread.org.uk

Promotes the welfare of lone parents and their children

Home-Start

infoline: 08000 686 368

web: www.home-start.org.uk

A national network of groups offering support to families struggling to cope

Parentline Plus

helpline: 0808 800 2222

web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

24-hour helpline

How to...

parent when you're in a crisis

Useful websites

www.direct.gov.uk

information about public services including benefits and other financial help

www.mumsnet.com

www.netmums.com

Online support for parents

www.relate.org.uk

Advice and counselling on relationship and family problems

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information, covering:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- wellbeing

Mind's information is ideal for anyone looking for further information on any of these topics.

For more details, contact us on:

tel. 0844 448 4448

email: publications@mind.org.uk

web: www.mind.org.uk/shop

fax: 020 8534 6399

Support Mind

Providing information costs money. We really value donations, which enable us to get our information to more people who need it.

Just £5 could help another 15 people in need receive essential practical information booklets.

If you would like to support our work with a donation, please contact us on:

tel. 020 8215 2243

email: dons@mind.org.uk

web: www.mind.org.uk/donate

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Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.



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