

How to support siblings

When someone is struggling with their mental health it can be tough on the whole family, particularly siblings. So here are five tips from NHS mental health professionals that might help you to support the siblings of a child experiencing mental health issues.

1. Keep things in perspective

If you're focusing on the needs of one child, you might start to feel guilty for prioritising them over others. While this is perfectly understandable, you shouldn't beat yourself up about it. As much as you might want everything to be okay, there are some things that you won't be able to control, so you need to be realistic. Remember that you're only human and are doing the best you can.

Tips for maintaining a positive outlook

- Difficult times are when we tend to learn the most. Try to view challenges and mistakes as part of a learning curve where each experience is making you better prepared for future challenges.
- Breaking big challenges down into smaller portions can make them more manageable and makes it easier to feel a sense of accomplishment when you achieve goals along the way.
- Allow yourself to find the humour in even the most difficult moments, and when things are tough remember that what's happening will probably make for a great story in the future.
- Whenever it feels as though everything is against you, think of the things in your life that you are grateful for, like people who are important to you or even just the occasional little pleasures. Gratitude can help you to keep things in perspective.
- Build resilience by reminding yourself of previous occasions when you've come through adversity and gained valuable experience.
- Remember that while you can't change the past, you can change the future. Try to visualise and focus on creating the future you are aiming for.

2. Acknowledge the issue

Be aware that although they may not have the same need of attention as the child who's struggling with their mental health, they may also be worried or even facing challenges of their own. Just being aware of that, letting them know that it's okay not to be okay and encouraging them to ask for help if they need it will give them reassurance that they're not alone.

Tips for supporting siblings

- Remember that adolescence can be a difficult time and young people generally don't have the experience, confidence, or know-how to brush off what you might consider to be trivial issues, but to them can be deeply stressful challenges.
- Try to ask questions rather than making statements. A good starting point is to ask how they're doing.
- If they begin to open up but seem hesitant, encourage them to say more by nodding or using phrases like 'go on' or 'tell me about that'. This will let them know that you care and are listening.
- Think about what they tell you and try to imagine what that must feel like. Let them know that you understand by acknowledging how difficult it must be for them.
- Remember to say sorry when you get it wrong. It'll mean a lot and show that you're only human and doing the best you can.

3. Stay connected

Balancing your focus is never going to be easy, so do what's manageable and try to find ways to work small wins into the family routine. Whether it be a few minutes for a one-to-one chat, a hug and a smile in passing or even just a text message asking how they're doing. Just knowing that you're there for them and that they're on your mind can make a big difference.

4. Work as a team

Sometimes the issue for siblings is feeling excluded, so a lot of families have found that doing things together as a team makes everyone feel more appreciated and included, and it helps to build resilience as a family.

Tips for keeping the family together through mental health challenges

- Some families have found that treating the mental health problem as if it were the child's disruptive best friend, recognising its personality and even giving it a name, has helped them to understand it, accept it and to set some shared boundaries.
- Encouraging the family to eat meals and do chores, activities or games together can help to strengthen the family bond and help siblings to feel less isolated. But don't force the issue if doing so might represent an additional stress.

5. Build a support network

There are only so many hours in the day so it can be difficult to make time for everyone, so think about friends and family who might be able to help with any chores or errands that free up your time to spend with those in need of a bit of TLC. Also, parent support groups and charities like sibs.org.uk can help you to get the support you need.

Some additional resources that may help.

- Parents – Supporting your sibling child <https://www.sibs.org.uk/supporting-young-siblings/parents/>
- Childline: Having a sibling with a mental health issue <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/mental-health/someone-family-mental-health-problem/>
- How to find your local young carers project <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/young-people/young-carers/local-service-finder>
- NHS advice for supporting the mental wellbeing of others. Better Health: Every Mind matters (<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/>)
- For information on how to access NHS Mental health services visit <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>
- Mind.org offers dedicated advice about parenting a child with a mental health problem <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/parenting-with-a-mental-health-problem/helping-your-children/>