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Emergency letters for children of mentally ill parents

Information and guidelines for parents
and professionals who work with

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1. General information on emergency letters

How an emergency letter can be helpful to you and your child

Write a type of emergency letter for your child which he/she can read or which can be read aloud to him/her, should you have another psychological emergency. Write to your child what you would really like to say to him/her at this moment but due to your illness you would probably be unable to express. With the help of this letter you can assist your child during this difficult situation. Writing this letter can help you to empathise with your child`s situation and at the same time you won`t feel completely helpless. Even if letter writing can stir up emotions, the finished letter will make you feel better.

Drafting the letter

The letter should be worded according to the child`s age and adapted to your individual family situation. Since many parents find it hard to draft such letters I have prepared corresponding guidelines and two examples of letters of this kind.

What you write in your emergency letter for your child is clearly up to you. The following guidelines and two examples of letters should simply serve as a helpful suggestion. It is important that you find your own words which suit you. Your child will notice whether you use your own words or not and whether they come from the heart.

When preparing your letter it would maybe be helpful for you to imagine a time of psychological crises: you are beside your child and want to accompany him/her through this difficult time. What would you really like to say to your child?

Taking a step back from the situation can help some parents find the right words: imagine the mother or father of your child`s classmate was ill. What would you say to this child? Subsequently, you can rewrite the letter especially for your child.

Keeping the letter safe

When the letter is finished, think about whether you would like to give it to your child for safekeeping or rather to an older sibling, the child`s other healthy parent, the grandparents or another supportive adult in the child`s life. The most important thing is that the child receives the letter promptly during an emergency.

Siblings / younger children

If you have several children you should write a separate letter for each one. For younger children you could make an audio recording instead, or you could write the letter in such a way that the child`s person of trust can read it aloud to him/her. Maybe your partner or other next of kin would also be very happy to receive such a letter from you.

2. Suggestions for the letter content

- ▷ Express your regret that your child needs the letter at this time because that means that an emergency situation has reoccurred.
- ▷ A sudden change in a parent`s behaviour can make children feel unsettled. Describe the typical symptoms of your illness which your child will probably notice. That strengthens your child`s perception of the illness.
- ▷ Directly encourage your child to trust their intuition. That is particularly important during psychoses when one`s own perception of the illness inevitably differs greatly from that of others.
- ▷ Empathise with your child. Describe the possible effect of your changed behaviour on your child and tell your child that you can understand how he/she is feeling.
- ▷ Is there something which you would like to point out to your child in relation to the symptoms of your illness? What could/should your child do or not do? What could be helpful?
- ▷ Children understandably wish to help their ill parent and feel like they have failed when they notice that they are actually unable to do that. So that your child does not fall into this trap remember to include in your letter who will take care of him/her. By doing this you are telling and allowing your child to know whom he/she should trust and inform, if your child is worried or even afraid.
- ▷ Protecting/supporting your child:
 - ▷ Request that your child takes care of him/herself if he/she is old enough to do so. Make concrete suggestions.
 - ▷ Give him/her explicit "permission to talk".
 - ▷ Make a list of suggested people whom your child can turn to with their thoughts and worries.
 - ▷ Give your child courage and hope for an improvement in your health and show understanding for the straining situation:
 - ▷ Remind your child of the good times spent together and specific shared experiences.
 - ▷ Remind your child that the last time you were ill you did manage to get well again.
 - ▷ Increase your child`s self esteem:
what do you like best about your child?
What does he/she do particularly well?
 - ▷ Express your affection for your child and also your regret that you are ill at the moment and therefore you are unable to tell him/her all this in person.

3. Examples of crises letters

Example 'A letter for Laura'

Laura is 11 years old and lives with her single mum who suffers from a bipolar disorder. During her last mania six months ago she was admitted to a clinic. At this time Laura lived with her school friend's parents, the Meyer family, since she only has one aunt who lives far away and there are no other relatives living nearby who were able to talk her in. The mother has talked to her daughter about the difficulties for Laura linked to her illness as well as developing an emergency plan for herself and her child. Subsequently, she wrote a letter for her daughter and asked Laura to read it should she notice signs in her mother's behaviour again which cause her to worry and suggest a relapse.

My Darling,

by now you will have had to have opened the letter. I really hoped that it wouldn't be necessary. Probably the worst thing for you is that I will often tell you that it isn't necessary because I'm fine. Maybe I'll accuse you of overreacting or I'll get angry at you. Unfortunately, it's in keeping with my illness that I don't spot the signs of a relapse. You've developed a good intuition for other people and you've often been the first one to notice when my behaviour changes: when I can't sleep much, I start lots of things without finishing them, I ask you bizarre questions, I buy unnecessary things, I drink too much alcohol and I can't respond to the needs of others, I see only my own needs.

Trust your intuition, sweetheart. Confront me about the changes in my behaviour and tell me that you're concerned. If I react stropily or aggressively then that's not a good sign. If I was well then I would take your worries very seriously and I'd immediately speak to my psychiatrist.

Please call Aunt Betty and tell her about your concerns. That is my explicit wish even if I maybe say otherwise at the moment. I've spoken to Aunt Betty. She'll take you seriously and will inform my psychiatrist Mrs Seifert. Mrs Seifert will then call me into her practice immediately and if I fail to show up she'll drop by our house and give me my tablets.

I really hope that I don't perceive the support offered to me as a threat. Unfortunately I can't promise you that. I know that this is a very difficult situation for you and you're not only scared for me but also perhaps of me. Maybe you're also angry because I'm being unreasonable and won't accept help. I wish I was healthy my love so that I could be near you. I'm so sorry that I can't be there at the moment. In order to be near you I have to get well again and for that I need help. I know that you would like to help me. You'd already be doing that if you contact Aunt Betty. If you can't get hold of her and you're really worried then please call Mrs Seifert straight away. You can definitely call the Meyer family and stay over at their place. I've sent letters to the Meyer family, Mrs Seifert and Aunt Betty in which I grant my permission for you to sleep there.

I'm probably living in another world now, where there is no room for you. However, it's very important to me that despite your worries, you have plenty of nice things to do and that you're distracted. Please have a look at the list of the things that you like doing which we drew up together. Do you remember when we discovered that we both love Robert Pattinson and that we like watching the Twilight films?

Please don't despair, Laura. There will be good times again. Maybe I'll have to go into hospital but I'll come back. You'll be well looked after by the Meyer family. You may speak to everyone you trust about your worries – even if I say otherwise at the time.

Laura, you must always know that I love you more than anything. I've written this letter so that I am at least with you in some way or another. You're an intelligent, pretty girl and you're interested in so many things. You're a good listener, you have a good knowledge of human nature and you know your own mind. Stay exactly as you are and I will hopefully be back with you very soon.

All my love,
Your mum

Example 'A letter for Max'

Max is five years old and lives with his parents. Max's mother has already had many depressive phases which have had to be treated in hospital. Max's father and grandmother have looked after Max during these times. Both parents have already spoken to Max about the illness and the most important points. Max clearly misses his mother a lot when she stays in bed or has to undergo treatment in the clinic. The mother has given the father the letter for Max and has asked him to read it aloud to him should another depressive phase reoccur.

Dear Max,

Dad is now reading you my letter. I've written it for you in case my 'sad illness' comes back. It's then hard for me to show how much I love you, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, and to tell you what I would like to at the moment. We all hoped that this illness wouldn't come back. But it has done. However, I am sure that the illness will go away again too.

You have probably noticed in the last few days or weeks that I don't smile as often as I usually do and that I talk less and less. I'm probably lying in bed, I'm feeling sad and don't want to play with you or cuddle you. That's because of my sad illness, Max, and not because of you. You can't do anything about it. You're my sunshine. I care about you so much and I wish that I could smile and play Playmobil with you again.

I understand that you're trying to make me smile or to comfort me. It's so sweet of you that you'd like to help me get well. But I'm afraid it's impossible. Sometimes only a doctor can do that. Do you remember when you once had the fever? I took you to the doctor's and he gave you something which helped you. It's like that for me now. I'm also going to see a doctor who helps me. But sometimes it can take a few weeks. Perhaps it will be necessary for me to go to hospital because the doctor there can help me better. Dad will tell you if that's the case.

Dad has probably already called Grandma so that she can help us at home. I imagine that you'd prefer it if it was me who was taking you to preschool every morning and who was reading you a bedtime story every night. I will do that again soon. First I have to get better. Until then Dad and Grandma will look after you. Both of them will play with you and cuddle you and take you to preschool.

What's more, I'd like you to see your friends and that you can laugh with them. While I'm ill it's nevertheless better if you see your friends at their houses, Dad will organise that.

My darling Max, I know that it's a difficult time for you but we'll get through it. Please remember that I love you. Don't be sad that I can't show it as much as I'd like to. That's not because you're not lovable. It's because of my illness.

If something troubles you please speak to Dad, Grandma or another adult friend, please promise me that.

Your mum, who loves you very much.