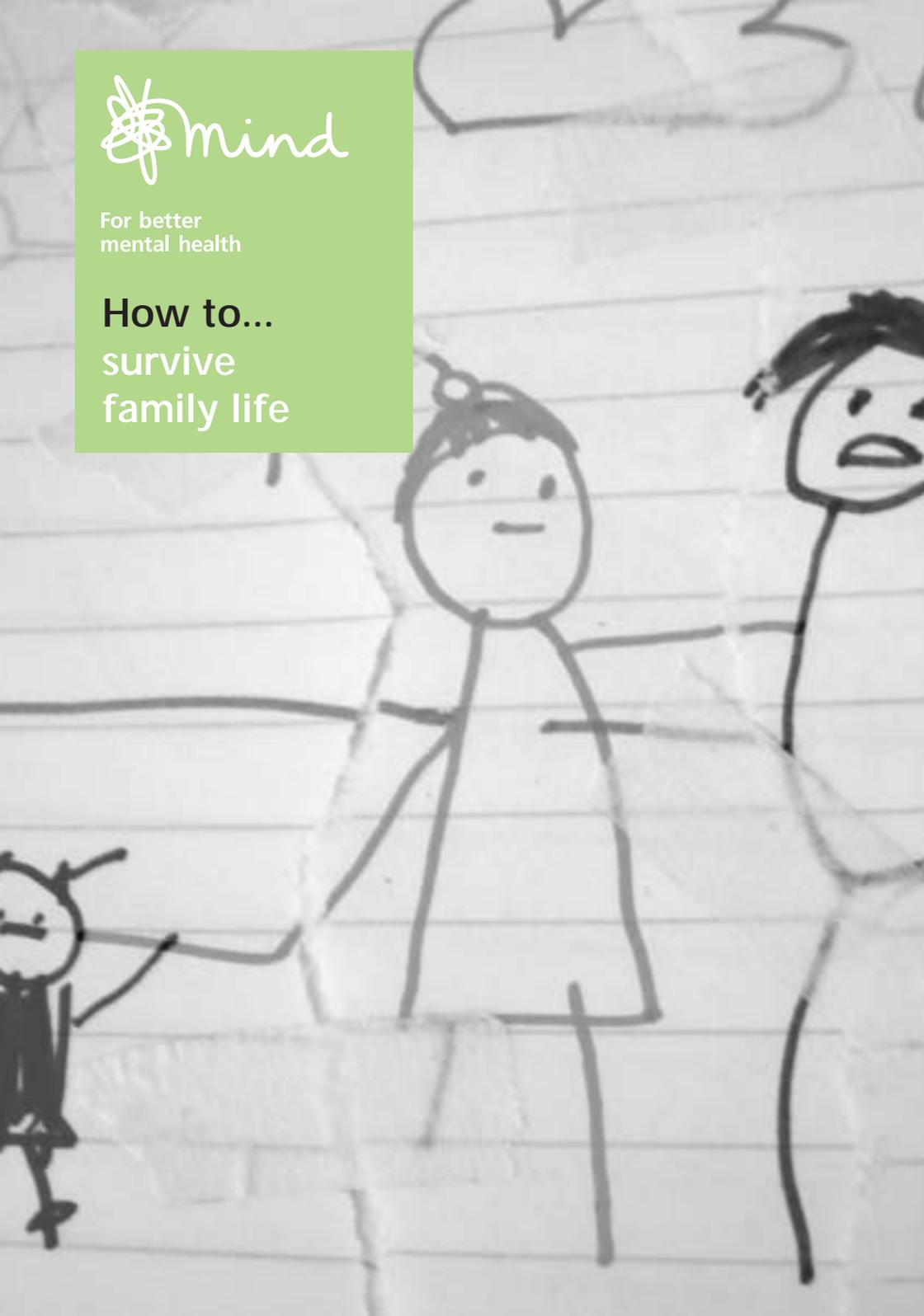




For better
mental health

How to... survive family life



How to... survive family life

“I’d like my kids to have the same childhood as I did, because I have nothing but fond memories. I remember my mother always being there, and I’m sure it’s influenced my decision not to go back to work. My mother seemed to do everything so effortlessly, but now I realise how hard she was working. One night a week my dad would go out and my mum would lie in the bath. It must have been her treat but, inevitably, one of us would go and talk to her. I think, even now, I don’t really appreciate that she has her own life. I expect her to be there, to drop everything, and she does.”

“After my marriage broke down, I thought long and hard about my relationship with my parents and the effect it had on the rest of my life. I know I have a problem with intimate relationships (despite my second marriage), and I know what it stems from – being smothered by my parents. I don’t anticipate ever contacting them again... People say that the worst thing about family feuds is that they get carried on for generations. Well, that won’t happen in my case. I don’t have any kids and I don’t plan to. I think that’s the most significant legacy of the way things worked out with my parents.”

This booklet is for anyone who would like to know how to improve the quality of their family life. It looks at what it means to be a family nowadays, identifies some of the causes of stress within families, and explains what you can do to overcome them.



What do we understand by 'family'?

Families are often thought of as mum, dad, and 2.4 children, but, in fact, that is only a small part of the picture. Families include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, stepparents, and others to whom we are related by blood or marriage, or with whom we have a close bond. Families vary. Family life could mean, for instance, the life of a commune with over a dozen members who all share a household, but who are not necessarily related to each other by blood. It could mean a 'blended' family, where you have a father and his kids, plus a mother and her kids, plus kids of both father and mother. Perhaps the children don't all live there full time. It could also include a homosexual or lesbian couple and any children they have.

Families come in many shapes and sizes; there's no 'right' structure. Different families and different cultures have different needs and values, and express this in their patterns of relating. Families also differ in how they relate after divorce. Some separated or separated divorced fathers lose all contact with their children. Others are able to arrange shared child care with their ex-partners, in a relatively friendly way. Some men manage to have two families, and keep the existence of one secret from the other!

Coping with family life is a complex business. We may feel our families are too much with us, or else that they are not there at all. It's possible to feel both at once! We can be with our relatives most of our lives, and yet feel that they do not understand us or see us as we really are. On the other hand, they may, literally, not be there. We may be separated by space, because they are living in another city or country, or by a falling out.

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Perhaps many of us expect far too much from our families. We want them to make up for the hurts and stresses of life outside – when a relationship breaks down or a work situation becomes very stressful. Family members may behave as though they are entitled to make enormous emotional demands on one another, and to expect unquestioning loyalty and obedience.

Each generation will have very different ideas about the right attitudes and behaviour, as will people from different cultural backgrounds. This may result in conflict. For instance, a person may wish to choose his or her own partner, when their parents may think that only an arranged marriage is acceptable.

We may harbour the unrealistic expectation that family life will be ‘happy ever after’; that when we have won our partner all will be well. It’s very hard, but very maturing, to wrestle with the reality that our spouse or partner is only human, and makes mistakes – just like we do – and to forgive them for it.

The very nature of family ties adds to the stress and strain. These are often the people who changed our nappies, fed us, read or told us stories and held our hands crossing the road, when we were children. The length and intimacy of these ties explains why our feelings are so mixed. We both love our relatives and get furious with them. We may even feel we hate them, at times. We want our families to be a support, a shelter against life’s storms. But, at the same time, we don’t want to be confined or tied down by them. We are also deeply attached to them and need them for our emotional wellbeing. Yet, we sometimes have to separate ourselves from them. However much we may dislike them, move away from them, geographically, or refuse to speak to them, they are facts in our lives.

Why is family life more difficult nowadays?



Smaller households

Most people live in smaller households, and at a greater distance from their extended families than, say, 50 years ago. This means that feelings within the home, both good and bad, are more intense. The people who might once have dissolved tensions – aunts, uncles or cousins – live further away.

Community breakdown

Few of us enjoy the support of a close-knit community of friends. Even neighbours may be strangers. As we rely more on the private car for transport, the streets become more dangerous for our children. We have to keep them indoors. Local shops close and we shop more in large supermarkets. We no longer meet people we know, as we walk around our neighbourhood to the shops, or keep an eye on each other's children, at play, in the street. We may have to move house to another place, to follow our own, our partner's or our parent's job prospects, increasing our isolation.

A fair division of labour

Nowadays, there is much more of a split between the worlds of work and of home. At work, 'important' things happen, money is made, and the tasks performed have money attached to them. At home, on the other hand, children are reared, no money is made and tasks are performed 'for love'.

Traditionally, 'work' has been seen as men's sphere, and the home as women's. Housework – the many daily hours spent cooking, cleaning, shopping, decorating, washing, ironing, tidying up, mending things, caring for sick and elderly relatives and minding the children – is not usually counted as work. Or, only if it's being done for money for someone else's family (when, it's paid badly and has low status). It is endless, private, and invisible.

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The sphere of 'work' is very different. Work has a beginning and an end, it's public and it's paid. The hours worked and the rate of pay attached to them may be the subject of dispute, but the work is visible. The pay gives the worker power and status within the family.

More and more women are entering the world of work. Men are not showing a comparable enthusiasm for taking up the unwaged and constant labour involved in housework. This is hardly surprising. But it means there are more disputes over money and housework – two of the major causes of family breakdown, according to marriage guidance counsellors.

Money pressures

When money is tight, during an economic recession, it makes things more difficult both at home and at work. At work, many people are made redundant. Many more are afraid they will be, and this fear pervades their working day. Shops close and whole neighbourhoods become run down. Libraries and other community facilities suffer financial cuts, and even street cleaning is cut back. These all make the tasks of running a home more difficult, at the same time as more stress is being brought into the home from the workplace.

More surprisingly, perhaps, economic growth can also make family life more difficult. A work promotion may involve uprooting your family from one place and taking them to another. Having a better life than your parents (more money, a bigger house, and further education) can be very difficult. You may feel guilty, or feel you can't communicate across the generations any more. Sometimes, one partner benefits more from, or may react differently to, the changed economic circumstances.

What makes families work well?



Families who are able to develop the following characteristics seem to be happier and more successful at nurturing all their members, generally speaking.

Coping with change

Families need to develop the capacity to cope with change. Change is central to life, as we move from being infants to claiming our old-age pension. Lack of change is stifling. But people differ in how they feel about coming changes. For some families, who are open to it, change is welcome; others find all change frightening. Most of us are somewhere in between.

All changes involve loss as well as gain. When we move house, we not only gain a new one (however desirable), but we lose the old. When our child starts to walk, we lose our babe-in-arms. We often acknowledge this aspect of life by having a party, to say goodbye to friends when we move, or to mark leaving school or a job. But if we fail to mark these events, and especially if we have other unacknowledged losses in our past (perhaps a traumatic move in our childhood, or the death of someone close that has not been fully mourned), changes can bring on depression. This can then make us resistant to further change that others close to us want. It can make us repressive, as parents, and lead to family tensions.

Open communication

The ability to communicate with each other is crucial. The more we express our feelings, the more we are able to understand each other. This means there's more chance of everyone being satisfied with family life. This is not easy to achieve! All families have some 'no-go' areas that are taboo or unthinkable – 'bad' feelings such as anger, envy, lust, and associated 'bad' behaviours.

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It's often easier to see – or imagine we see – this kind of feeling or behaviour in other people. It can be comforting to believe that 'people like us' don't have drink problems, or extra-marital sex, or become angry and use violence, or fall in love with someone of the same sex, or abuse children. People who do these things are 'them'. 'They' are of a different class, or gender, or race. 'We don't have any of that where we come from'. In a family that holds on to this kind of delusion, things will be very difficult for a family member who does the taboo thing or expresses the forbidden feeling. It may cause a permanent split. Either the family member concerned will split away from the family or, if this is too hard, they may 'split off' the part of themselves that wanted to break the taboo. Both outcomes cause great pain, on either side, although often it isn't possible to admit this. Family taboos often have a history to them, of which the person who challenges them may not be aware.

Another outcome is possible. The family may adapt or soften the taboo, so that the challenging family member can stay as part of the family. This outcome is enriching for both sides, as it widens the range of emotional expression that is allowed within the family. Where tolerance is practised, this kind of devastating conflict is less likely to happen. Even if it does happen, it's more likely to be resolved with the least possible emotional hurt.

Asserting yourself

Assertiveness is the skill of letting others know what you want and how you feel. If you don't have it, you can have huge problems in your family life. For example, a woman is angry with her partner, because he doesn't spend much time with her or do any child care.

However, she doesn't like to admit this, even to herself, as she has always been taught that good women, especially mothers, don't get angry. But she is just not interested in sex any more... Meanwhile, the man is feeling she is just too preoccupied with the children and not giving him enough attention, or appreciating how hard he is working. After all, he has been brought up to believe that a father shows his love for his family by going out to work and providing for them. So he spends more time at work, to show her.

This situation could turn into a vicious circle of misunderstanding. One way of approaching this problem would be to set aside a special time to talk about how they really feel. They could choose a time when their children won't interrupt, then unplug the phone and refuse to answer the doorbell. Each person should feel that they can have their say, and should also be ready to receive feedback about their attitudes and behaviour. If this doesn't enable them to work out their difficulties, they might wish to consider the option of seeking counselling together. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

Of course, what is troubling this family is not just the lack of assertiveness between the parents. They are wrestling with the daunting tasks and responsibilities of being parents, in a culture where children's needs have low priority and communities are fragile. They would benefit not only from better communication, but also from more practical help. They need more adults to be around during the day, a nursery place, shorter working hours and more places for the children to play.

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Having fun

Creativity can enhance family life in various ways. It can be applied to thinking up shared treats, meals, outings or other events; or to enriching family rituals, such as the shabbas meal or Sunday lunch. One of the most important aspects of creativity is a sense of humour, the capacity to make others laugh – a vital survival skill.

Creative activities, like family concerts, plays, singing or dancing together, strengthen and enrich family ties. They provide shared pleasures and, as the proverb says, 'The family that plays together, stays together'. These activities can also express and confirm the values the family hold in common, a way of affirming their sense of who they are.

Playing together could also include activities that express the family's political, cultural or religious values: the local pantomime, the Gay Pride march, the school social and the community festival.



What can I do to improve family relationships?

A problem, here, is that, nowadays, British cultural life is short of events that adults and children can enjoy together. There is a lot of scope here for creative problem-solving!

- Focus on developing your own communication skills, creativity and assertiveness. You can do this by joining a class or a group. You will then take these enhanced qualities back into your family life with you, and that will have a knock-on effect on family members. These qualities are catching!

- Look at your pattern of communicating within your family. Consider who you talk to, and what about. If communication consists mainly of criticism and complaining, think about ways in which you could change that.
- If you are having a problem now, it may feel as if you are the only person in your family it has ever happened to. This is probably not true. It can be helpful to find out if the issue has arisen before, and how it was handled. Try talking to those relatives you don't usually communicate with much, especially the older ones. This may give you surprising information about your parents and your own past, and cast new light on present difficulties. A word of warning – this may prove to be stressful, since you may find out about unpleasant events.
- Examine your expectations of your family. How realistic are they? How much is your way of reacting to them a habit, rooted in the past, and to what extent does it reflect who you are now?
- Seek professional help. Counselling or psychotherapy may help you to come to terms with childhood events and past losses that may be affecting family relationships. If your relationship with your partner is a source of distress for both of you, going for counselling as a couple is an option you could consider. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

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Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or *Mindinfo*line on 0845 766 0163.

Akina Mama Wa Africa (AMWA)

334–336 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7LQ
tel. 020 7713 5166, email: amwa@akinamama.com
Counselling and advice to African people and families

Asian Family Counselling Service

The Lodge, Windmill Place, 2–4 Windmill Lane, Southall UB2 4NJ
tel./fax: 020 8571 3933, email: afcs99@hotmail.com

Association for Shared Parenting

PO Box 2000, Dudley DY1 1YZ
helpline: 01789 750 891, web: www.sharedparenting.org.uk
Charity supporting parents or those going through separation

Contact a Family

209–211 City Road London EC1V 1JN
helpline: 0808 808 3555, web: www.cafamily.org.uk
Help for families caring for children with disability

Gingerbread

First floor, 7 Sovereign Close, Sovereign Court, London E1W 3HW
advice line: 0800 018 4318, web: www.gingerbread.org.uk
Advice line for lone parents

National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB)

Myddelton House, 115–123 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LZ
tel. 020 7833 2181, web: www.nacab.org.uk

For details of your local Citizens Advice Bureau, see your phone book

National Debtline

The Arch, 48–52 Floodgate Street, Digbeth, Birmingham B5 5SL
freephone: 0808 808 4000, fax: 0121 703 6940

email: info@nationaldebtline.co.uk

web: www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

For advice about debt

National Family Mediation

Alexander House, Telephone Avenue, Bristol BS1 4BS

tel. 0117 904 2825, web: www.nfm.u-net.com

Local family mediation services for separating or divorcing couples

NCH

85 Highbury Park, London N5 1UD

infoline: 08457 626 579, web: www.nch.org.uk

Supports vulnerable children, young people and families

Parentline Plus

520 Highgate Studios, 53–79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL

helpline 0808 800 2222, web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Helpline for anyone caring for children, including stepfamilies

Relate

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP

tel. 0845 456 1310 or 01788 573 241

email: enquiries@relate.org.uk

web: www.relate.org.uk

Offers counselling for adults with relationship difficulties

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Further reading

- The burden of sympathy: how families cope with mental illness* D. A. Karp (OUP 2001) £10.99
- Children caring for parents with mental illness* J. Aldridge, S. Becker (Policy Press 2003) £17.99
- How to cope as a carer* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to parent in a crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to restrain your violent impulses* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to survive mid-life crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to surviving working life* (Mind 2003) £1
- Parenting well when you're depressed: a complete resource for maintaining a healthy family* J. Nicholson, A. D. Henry, J. C. Clayfield (New Harbinger 2001) £13.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding bereavement* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding childhood distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding dementia* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding postnatal depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding premenstrual syndrome* (Mind 2004) £1

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Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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