



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Families standing up to shame and stigma by Reclaiming connection and finding belonging

Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and share new ideas about how to stand up to shame and stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples

Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Shame and stigma can operate in various ways to cut us off from connection and prevent us from feeling a sense of belonging. They can:

- make us feel unwelcome or unsafe in community spaces
- convince us we are not worthy of love or care, which might stop us from taking up invitations from others; and
- create fear and distrust that keeps us silent about our experiences and identities.

But children, young people and families find so many creative ways to reclaim connection and belonging in their lives, even in the toughest of times. This includes:

- building stronger connections with each other in our families
- finding and building connections with people outside of our family in our schools, workplaces and communities
- connecting with animals, faith, nature, ancestors, music, characters in books, social movements and more.

There is no one way or right way of finding connection.

Take a moment to think about ...



- When you or your children feel shame, what are the ways it impacts your connections to each other and to your community?
- Does stigma make it harder for you and your family to feel connection?
- What kinds of things make it easier for your family to feel connected to each other?

Stories of connection and belonging

Read the following stories to learn ways that families have created more opportunities for connection and belonging when they faced shame, stigma and tough times. We hope these stories will spark memories or ideas that remind you of how you and your family is already doing this.

Finding allies and creating safe spaces

‘Being persistent in finding the right people that you’re around, finding people that are maybe a bit ‘neurospicy’ as well, that get what you’re going through. Exploring a world full of hobbies and finding one that gives you more spoons* and helps recharge more. Hobbies with other people you like connecting with, or hobbies you can do alone.’

- KC, young person from a rural area

**Curious about ‘spoons’? Watch Ben Carpenter explain spoon theory on YouTube (please note the video contains a few words that might not be considered appropriate for little ears):*

<https://youtu.be/kHHk5lagliO>

‘One of my sons, because we moved schools a lot, he would find the outliers of the school. At one high school – which was really, really rough, really scary – we were the new people, it was a tiny country town [and] everyone knew we were struggling. So we had a lot of stigma stuck to us already, huge potential for teasing at the school. And straight away, within the first week, he had made friends with the toughest, scariest kids of the school, who turned out to be actually really nice and really good buddies. So he had some kind of security when something would happen.’

‘When I was young, I went to a drama club run by a youth service. I originally went because Mum suggested it. But it ended up being a safe space that I knew I could go to, that I could escape to when home was too much. There were times when home was so intense that I wanted to run away and leave. So I would get on my bike and go to the youth centre, and I knew people knew me and understood me and would be on my side. It was separate to school and separate to home. It was really good, really important. And I enjoyed it. The workers there, the adults there, knew what they were doing, they knew how to work with young people. They changed my life a bit. A lot of growth I can attribute to that youth centre.’

- Elliot, young person looking back on their childhood, Kurna Country

This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Supporting children’s social connections in tough times](#).

‘When I was little, I was basically the mum. I was seven years old, raising a newborn and helping my older siblings too. My mum kept putting in my head that if I told anyone that us kids would get taken off her [by child protection]. And then I eventually ended up opening up to one of my very favourite teachers at the time at school. She ended up working it out by the way I was acting ... I would always turn around and tell her that I had always eaten lunch but I never had. And then she eventually put the puzzle pieces together and was like, “You are not having lunch here?” I was like, “Yeah.” I tried lying about it and she eventually found out that I was lying. And then I was like, “OK, well, maybe I can talk to this person about what’s going on at home.”’

- Evelyn, young person from a rural area



LILY, 6 YEARS OLD

Moving away from an ‘us versus them’ mentality

‘At the times when you’re really up against it, a feeling of “us versus them” can be helpful. But I think if you don’t move away from it, it starts to create issues of isolation and a sense of mistrust. So it isn’t a good state to be in long-term. In order to move out of that us-versus-them state, you’ve got to have some kind of semi-stability in your housing or in your community of the people around you that you can trust. And then once you have that, you’ve got these places to reach out to. So it’s a matter of, instead of turning inwards as a family unit, turning outwards and then reaching out from there. It’s almost like a breathing out. You’ve gone from breathing in to “Now I can breathe out again.”’

Avoiding groups and people that increase shame and stigma

‘There are people that I decided to avoid. They were adding to my mental health situation, like some community groups or some people, they make faces or they strongly advise you to do something that I didn’t think was the right thing to do as a parent. I took some advice and I didn’t take some other advice. So that was a way to survive.’

Seeking out supportive people

‘When I came out to my mum and she really shamed me, I felt really bad. Some people were really supportive, whereas my mum was exactly the opposite. I gravitated towards the people that were compassionate, that were understanding, that cared. I lost a lot of friends, but I sought out people who were caring. Those sort of situations where that shame, that stigma, is so heavy and it’s like you’ve got to build up almost a wall around yourself, but you’ve got to be able to let people come in.’

‘Once I understood that I needed relationships for good wellbeing, I started doing things like going to the men’s shed, playing sport and going fishing with mates. I joined cycling bunches to ride with. These days I much prefer to do an activity with a friend than doing it alone because relationships really shift my emotional states. We’re bonding mammals. We’re wired for relationships. It’s OK to let people get close. That fear still pops up, but I notice it, then let it go. I tell myself this is OK and I can do it. It’s made a big difference to my ability to have intimate relationships and model relationships for my kids.’

Sharing your experience to help others

‘A shame that I faced in my life was after my separation. Culturally, being a single mother, it’s taboo [to talk about divorce, separation or being a single mother]. So what I did, I decided to accept it. I appreciate it and I talk about it when I can. Normally, people hide it, but I talk about it. I work as an interpreter. If I interpret [Persian and English] for a single mother, I say, “I’m a single mother, I’m working, I’m happy, I have a good life. And this is the benefit, this is pro and this is con, but these are the good things about it.” Things that I was ashamed of before, I can now talk about openly and honestly. It’s a way of healing. At the same time as I tell others that I’m happy with my life, I’m kind of telling myself that I’m happy with these bits of my life. And that’s important.’

Lived experience work

Lived experience work is when you do voluntary or paid work sharing or using the knowledge and skills gained from your lived experience of things like mental illness or family or sexual violence. This can include:

- public speaking
- being consulted by organisations or government
- being a peer worker or providing direct support to others; or
- being involved in a project like the one to create these resources.

Read the following stories in which three parents share their experiences of doing lived experience work.

Keeping a family focus

‘When doing lived experience work, I try to keep a family focus by reminding myself that it’s about my kids, not me. I’m doing this to help other families, so I’m thinking of how things were from my own family perspective.’

'My hardest times were when the kids were young, so I just keep going back to them, picturing them in my mind, bringing back remembered scenes with them when I'm recalling things. And thinking how grateful I am that it's in the past. That helps me not get dragged under into bad/sad feelings from past events. It's easy to get lost in the moment from my perspective, so I need to just keep on top of that and keep bringing myself back to the family focus.'

Telling my story to destigmatise mental health

'I work in the mines of western Tasmania as a mental health consultant. I'm a trained beyondblue speaker and I run training for leaders in some of the largest workplaces in Tasmania.

'I always tell my story because it destigmatises mental illness. I tell people that I was so unwell that, as an engineer, the only work I could do was picking tomatoes and fixing electric fences on a dairy farm. People can see that I'm a regular guy and that I have recovered and realise that it could happen to anyone, and that dealing with it takes courage. It's fear and shame that stops us from accessing support. I don't tell men to get help, I tell them to take action. Courage is what you do in the face of fear, not the absence of fear.

'In being able to speak so freely about my experience, it enabled my daughter to open up to me when she began to experience some suicidal thoughts as a teenager. She was comfortable speaking with me but not her mum, because I had normalised it and became comfortable with speaking about it.'

Heavy but rewarding

'Sometimes it's a bit heavy because I remember the story and the wound that is healed, but you scratch on it and it's bleeding again. So I cry with them. But I'm passionate to help still. I volunteer. It's a bit difficult, but at the same time it's really rewarding because I feel like we understand each other. I feel like we're not alone. I feel like even if I help one woman or one family who were in a similar situation that I was, I make a little bit of difference, then that's a good feeling. I don't know what hormone I make in my brain, but it's just like I feel I did something really good and I'm making positive changes.'

If this sounds like something you might like to do, check out *Tips for getting involved in lived experience work* on page 6 of this fact sheet.



Take a moment to think about ...



- What stood out to you from reading these stories?
- What did it make you think of in your own life or in your family?
- What kinds of connections make a difference for you when you have experienced shame or stigma? Are they connections with family, people, places, culture, nature, animals, faith or other things?
- What will you think about or do differently after reading these stories?

Next, you might like to read our fact sheet [Families standing up to shame and stigma by using care and compassion](#).

Recommended resources

Emerging Minds Families podcasts

Listen to the episode [Finding connection in a community choir](#) about a group of women with lived experience of family and domestic violence who raised their voices and found connection.

You might also be interested to hear [How a neighbourhood coffee house brought a community together](#), which shares the story of a suburban café that became the meeting place for a family and their adopted grandparents.

Stories of lived experience

Fear and stigma can leave young people feeling isolated and unable to speak up. OurHerd is a free storytelling app that empowers young people to confidently and safely share their stories. OurHerd captures story insights and acts as a megaphone for young people to inform governments, policy makers and service providers for systems change: ourherd.io

Connection and belonging

Emerging Minds' [connection and belonging resources](#) were created by families who have been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for finding and sustaining a sense of belonging.

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Shame and stigma resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma

Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit emergingminds.com.au/families

Or you can follow us on social media or our podcast channel:

 [instagram.com/emergingmindsau](https://www.instagram.com/emergingmindsau)

 [facebook.com/EMFamilies](https://www.facebook.com/EMFamilies)

 emergingminds.com.au/families/podcasts

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Tips for getting involved in lived experience work

Here are some ways families have found lived experience work:

- Contacting an organisation that works in the field you have lived experience in (such as mental health, drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, disability, migrating as a refugee) and talk to them about working or volunteering.
- Researching different organisations locally and nationally and asking if they have a lived experience program and if they are currently seeking participants.
- Searching online for 'peer work certificate' in your local area.
- Searching online for 'peer work jobs' in your local area.

Ensure you are provided with enough information

If you are offered an opportunity to share your lived experience, you might like to ask about:

- What is the role of the organisation you will be partnering with?
- What is the purpose of the task or activity they are asking you to contribute to?
- How will you contribute? What is the time commitment? What are the limitations of the project? How much of a say will your voice have?
- What is the confidentiality process?
- How will you be supported in your role? Is there support for disabilities, different literacy levels or other needs?

- Will you be paid for your time or compensated for any travel required and what is the process for this?
- What should you do if you have difficulties with the work or want to withdraw?
- Who are the relevant staff members and how can you contact them?

Ask yourself: Is this the right thing for me to do at this time?

- Are you at a point in your life where you feel ready to do this?
- Do you have good support from family, friends or professionals?
- How might you being involved impact your family?
- Will talking about difficult things be OK for you?
- Are you under stress or in a time of crisis? Or do you already have a lot of family or other commitments?
- Do you have the time to commit to the process?
- Do your values align with the organisation's values?

Thinking about these questions might help you decide if now is the right time to get involved.

Family confidentiality

Also consider confidentiality. This not only includes your own privacy, but also your family's privacy, especially of any children. Sometimes lived experience work involves sharing some family details publicly. It may be important to discuss these issues with your family and ask your family's consent. You may also need to consider the privacy of other third parties, such as services, health professionals, schools, and so on.

Remember that you should never feel pressured to share family details publicly, and there are lots of ways to do lived experience work that doesn't include this.