

# Supporting Siblings of Children with Mental Health Needs



## The Sibling Experience

Life at home can be very difficult for siblings of children with mental health needs.

It's **confusing** when your brother/sister has unpredictable behavior or rapidly shifting moods.

It's **scary** when you are the target of your brother/sister's aggression, either physical or verbal.

It's **stressful** to feel worried that your brother/sister might hurt him/herself or someone else.

It's **embarrassing** to have a brother/sister who isn't able to control his/her behavior.

It's **unfair** that your brother/sister is held to a different set of expectations and rules of discipline because your parents are exhausted, and are trying to pick and choose their battles.

It's a **burden** feeling guilty for being the "normal one" in the family.

## Why Support Siblings?

Siblings are a hidden casualty of mental illness. Many siblings of children with mental health needs are keeping secrets about disturbing events happening at home, such as witnessing suicidal behaviors and being subjected to physical and verbal aggression from their ill brothers and sisters. As a result, many siblings struggle with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Siblings may also be at risk for developing maladaptive behaviors themselves.

The Sibling Support Program developed at UMass Medical School is an evidence-based, family-centered, mental health care initiative focused on improving outcomes for siblings of psychiatrically-involved children and adolescents. The researcher who developed it has been awarded the Excellence in Family Leadership award for making a significant difference in children's mental health across Massachusetts. The program is also supported by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.

## Innovative Interventions

A child's psychiatric hospitalization provides a rare opportunity to work directly with siblings and parents, while the child is cared for in a treatment facility. Our innovative programming includes:

- **Parent mentor-led groups for caregivers:** Our trained parent mentors educate caregivers about the impact of a child's mental illness on siblings, introduce parenting strategies that build resiliency, and empower parents to access family stabilization resources. Our mentors are credible sources of support in the eyes of families because they share the experience of raising children with mental illness.
- **Sibling group leader training and supervision:** We train mental health practitioners in sibling support methods, and we provide supervision and guidance as they lead recreational support groups for siblings. In the support groups, siblings meet peers who share similar challenges, have a safe place to process their trauma, learn coping skills, and recognize they are not alone.
- **Participant recruitment:** Our parent mentors make personal phone calls to caregivers, introduce themselves as parents who have gone through a child's psychiatric crisis, and personally invite families to participate.
- **Program evaluation:** We employ an effective, mixed methods evaluation approach. We provide data collection tools, data analysis, and an evaluation plan that is adapted for the unique needs of our partners.
- **Professional development:** We train faculty, staff, and trainees on best practices for supporting siblings and parents, as well as on the mechanics of delivering family-centered mental health care in an inclusive and effective manner.
- **Full service delivery components:** We provide participant handouts, curriculum development, monthly progress meetings, detailed posters to present at conferences, and opportunities to co-author papers on the sibling program.

## Customizable Services

We have the knowledge, creativity and experience to customize our program for all types of mental health providers. Our partners have incorporated our expertise in different ways. Teaching hospitals have partnered with us to create a sibling support rotation for psychiatry residents that satisfy requirements for group work while reinforcing the importance of family-centered health care. At a community hospital, plans are underway for our parent mentors to serve on patient treatment teams. We can tailor our program to address your goals and meet the needs of the specific populations you serve.

## Benefits of Sibling Support

- Increases resiliency among siblings of children with mental health needs.
- Decreases trauma associated with a brother/sister's mental illness.
- Builds skills, competency, and confidence among parents.
- Helps restore family stability.
- Decreases the stigma of mental illness through education.
- Allows hospitals to identify additional family members in need of treatment.
- Has the potential to reduce readmission rates for children with a mental illness.
- Improves communication between families and treatment teams.
- Provides training and hands-on experience in group work for practitioners and trainees.
- Enables hospitals to offer a broader range of family-centered mental health services.

### **Our program has a profound impact on siblings and their caregivers.**

#### **Siblings have said:**

"I learned that I'm not alone and there are others in the same boat as me."

"The most helpful part of the group was saying what is happening to my sister and being understood."

#### **Parents and caregivers have said:**

"I learned I need to go further than merely explaining behavior, and make sure the sibling knows she does not bear responsibility for either cause or care."

"I felt there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

## Why Choose Us?

Our expertise is based on extensive experience in the field, evidence-based research, and access to an internationally recognized faculty at UMass Medical School's Department of Psychiatry. We collaborate with clinicians, educators, parent mentors, and organizations that serve individuals and families with mental illnesses, including the Department of Mental Health, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Parent/Professional Advocacy League, and the Massachusetts Sibling Support Network.



Research shows that siblings, particularly sisters, grow up to become primary advocates and caregivers for brothers and sisters with disabilities. Our program has the potential to help siblings develop into well-adjusted adults who can advocate effectively for their ill brothers and sisters well into the future.

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#### **Visit our website:**

<http://shriver.umassmed.edu/>

We have served more than 700 caregivers and siblings of children and adolescents with mental health needs in Massachusetts.



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