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**Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC)**

RMHC in partnership with the Murdock Children’s Research Institute seek grant funding to enable the Take a Breath (TAB) program for the families staying at a Ronald McDonald House.

RMHC have a mission to support the ever changing needs of seriously ill children and their families. Taking care of a seriously ill child is one of the most draining and difficult tasks a parent can face. Beyond handling physical challenges and medical needs, they have to deal with a child's emotional needs and the impact that a prolonged illness can have on the entire family.

**The Take a Breath program is a group program for parents to prevent and reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress, to improve general parent mental health, and to help them adapt to life during and following their child’s illness.**

Similar to other traumatic life experiences, a serious illness in a child can trigger severe distress reactions, which may continue after recovery from the illness or treatment. This places enormous strain on families already struggling to cope with the emotional and practical burden of the illness. Research has found that more than 25% of parents with hospitalised children experienced significant post- traumatic stress symptoms three months after their child’s discharge.

Given that Ronald McDonald Houses accommodate families with some of the sickest children in Australia we are aware that many of these families’ mental health and well-being suffers during and long after their time with the charity. Over 10,000 unique families stayed in a Ronald McDonald House in 2018 to be near their seriously ill child receiving treatment in the partner hospital.

The Take a Breath program is designed for the same cohort of families that also utilise a Ronald McDonald House i.e. parents / carers of seriously ill or injured children and the program is evidence based and has demonstrated a significant change for these families. Furthermore, RMHC has a Family Advisory Group (families who have stayed at a Ronald McDonald House) and these families have informed the charity of the tremendous burden and stress of having a seriously ill child.

**RMHC has the potential to support these families both during and following their stay at a Ronald McDonald House. RMHC is seeking $800,000 funding over four years to enable 2 qualified psychologists under consultation with Dr Frank Mascara (MCRI) to deliver the Take a Breath program to families that are staying or have stayed at a Ronald McDonald House .**

The Take a Breath is an online program based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy principles, and is delivered by a clinician. It has been piloted and trialled in parents who have had a child (newborn to 18 years) diagnosed with a life threatening illness that required admission to the Neurology, Cancer, Cardiology, or Intensive Care Wards at the Royal Children’s Hospital.

Every year, thousands of Australian children are diagnosed with chronic and life-threatening medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, asthma, cystic fibrosis) and it has been found that 60% experience mental health problems, which negatively impact the management and prognosis of their condition. Chronic illness in young people also impacts their families, who may also experience significant mental health problems.

The Take a Breath program demonstrated that it is an acceptable and feasible intervention for parents, and that it increased engagement in the program, particularly for fathers. This program is also very accessible being delivered on-line, particularly for parents in rural or regional areas, or interstate.

The Take a Breath program successfully reduced symptoms of post-traumatic stress in parents, and also indicated that there were a number of improvements in mindfulness, values based living, and psychological flexibility. This is an important finding, and the development and uptake of psychological interventions for parents of seriously ill children has proven challenging internationally, given the significant caring burden placed upon these parents, geographical constraints associated with attending such programs, and limited success in achieving sustained psychological benefit.

**Delivery of Take a Breath**

Take a Breath is a six- session group program for parents, specifically five 90-minute consecutive weekly sessions, with a sixth and final session held three weeks following the fifth session. Parents participate from either the Ronald McDonald House or their own home using the Google Hangouts videoconferencing application. TAB is delivered by two co-facilitators, psychologists or mental health clinicians, trained in the content and delivery of TAB. Intervention materials (a set of values cards, a session booklet and guided mindfulness CD and mp3) are sent to parents to enhance online participation. Each TAB group can consist of a maximum of eight parents and partners.

**Parents Feedback**

*“I guess the main thing was from week 1 or week 2 where we were talking about, being a ship in a storm… and I guess for me having a child with a disability,, I know everyone has their own storms but we seem to have pretty regular and consistent storms and our normal is probably pretty abnormal to other people and being able to acknowledge that and have tools to actually move forward even though we’re in that situation has been very powerful…”*

*“I used to catastrophize and think about the worst-case scenario with (daughters name) review appointments. I would feel guilty about that. It felt like I was letting her down by thinking the worst, like it meant I didn’t believe in her or I might make it happen.*

*So I can stop focussing on what other parents have, and how well their children are, and wishing I was them, and I can enjoy my life for what it is, right now. “*

Some thoughts from parents about the online delivery:

*“I am often cooped up at home with a sick cancer kid and cannot leave the house”*

*“We were in our lounge room, so I felt like it allowed for greater intimacy”*

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***RMHC’s vision is to prevent and improve the mental health and well-being of the families staying in a Ronald McDonald House by providing support that is accessible and appropriate which is often neglected by current mental health services.***