

Supporting Friends and Family Who Have Mental Illnesses

If you have a family member or friend who's been diagnosed with a mental illness, you're probably wondering what you can do to help. Although new forms of therapy and medication make it possible for many individuals to lead full, independent lives, the support of family, friends and peers remains an essential element in the recovery process.

What Is a Mental Illness?

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and behavior that results in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness, all of which can be triggered by a variety of causes: a particular situation or series of events, an illness, genetics, biochemical imbalances, or any combination of those factors. Above all, it's important to remember that there is help and hope for your loved one.

Encourage a *Dialogue for Recovery*

A key element in recovery is a productive, two-way communication between patient and doctor — what Mental Health America calls a Dialogue for Recovery. Encouraging your friend or family member to foster this type of relationship with his or her team of healthcare professionals can make a big difference in helping your loved one to recover.

There are also many other ways you can help people cope with their disorder, get treatment and work toward recovery. Here are some tips for supporting someone close to you.

Support Strategies

Accept your feelings. You may find yourself denying the warning signs, worrying what other people will think due to stigma, or wondering what caused your loved one to become ill. Accept that these feelings are normal and common among others in your situation.

Educate yourself. Learn about the diagnosis, symptoms and available treatments. Local Mental Health America affiliates, public libraries and the Internet are all good resources.

Be compassionate. Recognize that your family member or friend may feel scared and confused after receiving a diagnosis. Although some people are relieved to get diagnosed and actively seek treatment, it may feel devastating to others.

Motivate. Encourage your loved one to learn about what treatments and services will promote recovery. Recognize that finding the right treatment or services can take time, and can involve a process of trial and error.

Practice “active listening.” Listen to your family member or friend and express your understanding back to them. Acknowledge the feelings he or she is experiencing and don’t discount them, even if you believe them to be symptoms of the illness.

Coping with unusual behavior. Certain behaviors people with mental illnesses may exhibit can be disruptive — especially in public — and difficult to accept. The next time you and your loved one visit his or her mental health professional, discuss these behaviors together and develop a strategy for coping.

Understand the challenges of medication. Although treatments have improved tremendously in the past decade, they can also lead to side effects that can make your family member or friend want to stop taking the medicine. Encourage your loved one to speak immediately to his or her health care provider about any problems related to medications.

Understand that it’s not just about medication. Recovery from mental illness isn’t only a matter of “just staying on your medications.” Self-esteem, social support and a feeling of contributing to society are also essential elements of recovery and should be supported.

Offer practical help. Offer to drive or accompany your family member or friend to medical and other appointments. And, if he or she wants you to, discuss the treatment, side effects or other issues with the doctor and treatment team.

Give respect. Always respect the individual’s need for and right to privacy. People with mental illnesses have the same right to be treated with dignity and respect as anyone else.

Establish a support network. Seek out your own support from family and friends. Self-help and support groups also provide an opportunity to talk with other people who are experiencing the same types of issues you are. They can listen and offer valuable advice.

Take time out. Schedule time for yourself to help you keep things in perspective. Making sure you pursue your own interests will help you have more patience and

compassion toward your loved one. You can only help others when you are physically and emotionally healthy yourself. Also, make sure any other family members aren't feeling ignored, and set aside quality time to spend together.

Maintain hope. There is hope for recovery, and with treatment, many people who have mental illnesses return to productive and fulfilling lives.

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