

THE FAMILY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness of a loved one affects everyone in the family. Reactions are varied. Some families have trouble dealing with the reality of the illness or feel a tremendous sense of shame and isolation. Some may become overly preoccupied with what has happened. In reaching out to a family member in this situation, it is important to remember that living with the disease can be bewildering and taxing. It is important for everyone to know that the family did not cause the illness; the family is not responsible for it. Self-blame and blame leveled by others is destructive for all concerned.

What families need to do is plan for the future. Many families who work together to deal with the often harsh effects of mental illness may discover a wealth of abilities and assets they possess as individuals and as a unit. The family's discovery of these strengths and skills often gives rise to changes that improve the quality of life for everyone in the family (including the person with the illness). As time goes by the family may find itself the first line of defense for their loved one. They must keep themselves physically and mentally healthy so they are able to best help their loved one.

ANYONE LIVING AND/OR WORKING WITH A PERSON WHO HAS A MENTAL ILLNESS SHOULD:

- Place no blame or guilt;
- Look for support;
- Seek relief from stress;
- Continue outside interests;
- Don't try to be "super parent", "super sibling", "super spouse", or "super friend".

Families have sometimes successfully developed and used techniques and strategies to help them cope with a family member who is mentally ill. These techniques can complement professional treatment.

Coping Tips

1. Learn all you can about the illness and educate other family members and friends about it.
2. Know resources for help and support before a crisis occurs.
3. Designate someone in the person's immediate circle (family member, friend) to be there when help is needed.
4. Anticipate vulnerable situations (difficult relationships, job stresses, anniversary and holiday dates), and space them out. For example, if Aunt Tess can't handle the relationship, don't have her to dinner when the person with illness is present.
5. Space out stressful events. Remember, what is stressful for your loved one may not be stressful for you.
6. Realize a person with a mental illness can suffer from memory loss or poor concentration. These can be frustrating and frightening, but do not be judgmental.
7. Break down tasks into small units so they do not overwhelm the person with the illness. Focus on SUCCESSES , not failures.
8. Avoid pampering. Set reasonable rules and limits and stick to them. If you find this difficult to do, ask the doctor or counselor for suggestions.
9. Avoid expecting that all peculiar behaviors and habits can be corrected.
10. Learn about medications: 1) What they are and do, 2) Side and residual effects they may have, 3) How and how long they take to work.
11. Pay attention to medications: 1) Are they being taken, 2) Do they seem to be working, 3) Other things noted.
12. Realize common substances (coffee, tea, sugar, alcohol, over-the-counter medications) may adversely affect the person with the mental illness.
13. Be sure other doctors (eye, internist, dentist, foot, skin or other doctors) know what medications the person is taking.
14. Realize another breakdown can be temporary. The person has recovered before and is likely to do so again.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR A PERSON WITH A SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS (*Hatfield, 1990:119*):

- Continuity and predictability
- Adequate structure and form
- Limited amount and intensity of stimulation
- Clear and calm communication
- Appropriate expectations
- Encouragement and positive regard

REACHING OUT TO SOMEONE WHO HAS A MENTAL ILLNESS

As you do with other friends, treat someone who has a mental illness as you would want to be treated, with understanding and respect.

When a person with mental illness:	You need to:
Is withdrawn	Initiate relevant conversations
Is over stimulated	Limit input, do not force discussion
Becomes insecure	Be accepting
Is fearful	Stay calm
When symptoms or medications cause behaviors such as:	You need to:
Disorientation or preoccupation	Keep to a known, structured routine
Difficulty with concentration	Slow down, and perhaps repeat; use simple, short sentences
Stress in ordinary situations	Create an uncomplicated, predictable environment
Trouble remembering	Help the person record information
Unsound judgment	Remain rational and reinforce common sense

Some symptoms of mental illness are unlike anything you will encounter elsewhere. YOU can't change that, but you can refrain from further destroying the person's integrity.

When a person with a mental illness:	You need to:
Is not grounded in reality	Listen for kernels of truth, or wait for a better time
Believes delusions	Avoid arguing
Displays little empathy	Recognize this as a symptom; try not to respond in kind
Has difficulty making contact	Make direct contact and keep the initiative
Seems totally lacking in self-esteem and motivations	Affirm the person's value; treat accomplishments positively

Fine inner qualities often remain and develop in spite of mental illness. Do not do "for" persons with a mental illness, do "with" them, as you do with other persons with other disabilities.

When a person with a mental illness:	You can:
Shows a talent such as music, writing or art	Be open to the person sharing this with you
Retains an inborn generosity	Acknowledge the gifts (which may not always be monetary)
Expresses an interest in his or her illness and its consequences	Learn together
Wants to help	Give them a task and let them do it
Wants to have a serious discussion	Remember, even the people with the most severe illnesses are rational as much as they are psychotic

"We are in your congregations, your churches, just think about how many of us there are and how many more of us there are with our families. We want to make friends with you. We want to talk to you. We want to work with you. We have capacities to help. Give us that opportunity."

Jay

"Remember us when you are trying to help us. Give us a chance to use what we have, what our capabilities are. Don't stop us. Let us fail. Let us try again. Let us reach as far as we can. That is the love and compassion we seek from you. If you love us, help us to fly, To soar toward our highest goals."

Terry