

Caring For Someone With a Mental Illness

For the person experiencing it, being diagnosed with a mental illness is a frightening and confusing period. It can also be a difficult period for that person's family, relatives and friends. A Carer is someone who helps his/her relative/friend with a mental illness on their journey to recovery.

HOW DOES MENTAL ILLNESS AFFECT A PERSON

Learning how mental illness is affecting their relative, and understanding what they are going through, is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a carer's role. Very often, the behaviour of someone with a mental illness is misunderstood. One such misconception is that "people with a mental illness are lazy and weak, and if they tried hard enough they could 'snap' out of it".

Fear about the onset of the next episode, confusion about the illogical, and at times irrational nature of their inner world may be some of the feelings experience by someone with a mental illness. They may also experience anger and bitterness due to the manner in which the mental illness is affecting all aspects of their life. They may be hypersensitive to criticism and feel as if other, including their carer and mental health professional, do not understand them or what they are going through. They may feel rejection from friends and relatives and consequently isolate themselves. They may experience an overwhelming sense of despair, loss of interest, lack of energy or motivation.

Angry outbursts may be demonstrated by somebody with a mental illness. This can be due to delusions or hallucinations, inner frustration and conflict, or an inability to manage anger. It is important for the carer to understand that they can seek assistance in terms of respite or other residential care. You may also like to advise your relative's case manager or doctor of the difficulties you are experiencing.

HOW TO HELP YOUR RELATIVE

Realistic Expectations: It is normal to feel the loss of what your loved one was able to do before the onset of mental illness. He or she may also be experiencing similar feelings of loss and sadness. However many carers envisage that 'recovery' for their relative is being able to function as they were before the onset of the illness. This can be true for some, however for others having this or expectation may carry over to the person with the mental illness who may also feel that they are not progressing. Expectations of employment or schooling may simply be inappropriate at certain periods, while a possibility at other times. Some realistic signs of progress could simply be when your relative starts eating with the family or having daily showers.

Positive Outlook: One of the most important ways a carer can help is by instilling hope of a more positive future for their relative. Often the person experiencing the illness may not be able to foresee 'better days'. Helping them have a more positive outlook in life can also show him/her your support and may further assist those who feel that they are 'burdening' the family as a result of mental illness.

Communication: Conversation and communication can at times become challenging when carers feel that their relative is not 'hearing' what they have said. At times this could be because s/he is preoccupied with other thoughts or because the relationship between the carer and relative has deteriorated to the extent where communication is difficult. Some hints for improved communication are:

- ➡ Face the other person and maintain eye contact
- ➡ Present one thought at a time
- ➡ Don't rush. Speak in a calm manner
- ➡ Listen to the other person's thoughts and feelings

- Acknowledge the other person's feelings.
- Repeat in different words to convey your meaning
- Time out – If you are not able to get your message across at any time, come back to the issue when both you and he/she are more receptive and patient. Don't go on arguing, no matter how logical you feel your argument is.

Problem Solving:

It is often tempting to *make* decisions for the person you are caring for rather than encourage them to come to a decision for themselves. Encouraging them to use problem-solving techniques will help empower them and give them some sense of control over their life.

Learn to Reduce Stress:

Encourage your relative to practice stress reduction strategies. Excessive stress may make someone with a mental illness more vulnerable to relapse. Good stress reduction strategies may even help reduce some symptoms of mental illness eg anxiety, depression, lack of motivation etc. Some simple ways to reduce stress are:

- Walking
- Relaxation, meditation (books, tapes, healthy lifestyle courses)
- Adequate rest, sleep
- Talking with a friend
- Listening to music

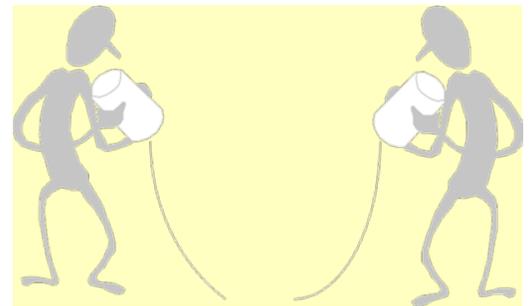
Be Empathic and Sensitive:

A person who is experiencing an acute episode of a mental illness may feel very unwell, just as we do when experiencing a physical illness. Avoid making comparisons to friends, colleagues and relatives success at work, school or relationships. Such comparisons may belittle the person with the mental illness, where he/she may feel far behind others in terms of success, achievements etc. Also remember that those who haven't

experienced a mental illness cannot fully understand what it is like for those that have.

Encourage compliance in taking medication:

There could be times when the person with the mental illness refuses to take medication. This may be due to the side effects they are experiencing or because they feel that the medication is not positively benefiting them. Simply saying to them to take their medication because “...It’s good for you”, often will not convince him/her. In fact they may feel that you do not understand their feeling. Keep in mind that he or she has reasons they believe why they should stop taking their medications.



Some things you can do to encourage compliance with medication are:

- ➡ When your relative is looking and feeling better, suggest that the medication may have played a role in them feeling better.

- ➡ If he/she is refusing to take their medication because of side effects, ask them to write down all the things they are experiencing and encourage them to make an appointment with their doctor to discuss the side effects. Also encourage them to ask the doctor what sort of things will help alleviate the side effects.

- ➡ If your relative feels that the medication is not helping him/her, then encourage them to ask their doctor how long it takes before the medication takes effect. Also bring up the issue of regular intake of medication. Help him/her understand that regular intake of medication is important, as it is for any other medical condition.

- ➡ Bring up the topic of medication when your relative is more receptive and more open to discussion – even the time of day may make a difference eg. some people with a mental illness may be more anxious or experience more symptoms at night, so daytime may be a better option for discussing medication.

If your relative suggests that they do not need to take medication because there is nothing wrong with them'. Discuss this with his/her doctor, and options such as community treatment orders and community counselling orders.

Learn: A more informed carer is better resourced to help their loved one.

- ➡ Find out information about the particular mental illness your relative is experiencing; about treatment options and the types of services available in your area.
- ➡ Carer workshops may be offered in your area health service. Such workshops may assist you to understand the issues involved in caring for someone with a mental illness.
- ➡ Attend support groups and meet other people in similar circumstances to you. Find out what helps them cope and care better.

