

# Helping Someone with Mental Illness



Caring for someone you love who is sick or disabled is never easy. When the illness affects your loved one's state of mind, the demands placed on you can be especially difficult.

Mental illnesses, such as depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar or anxiety disorders are biological in nature. This means that they directly affect brain function, making it difficult or impossible for the person to think, reason, feel, or relate to others in a predictable, normal way. As a result, relationships with family and friends can become strained, especially if efforts to help are met with indifference, anger, or suspicion.

## Nature, not nurture

Mental disorders are a leading cause of disability and often

strike people during adolescence and young adulthood. If your loved one has recently been diagnosed, it helps to know that most mental illnesses can be treated successfully. Medication, counseling, and other services significantly reduce symptoms and help improve the quality of life for up to 90 percent of people with mental illness.

As a person begins treatment and recovery, the emotional support of family and friends is vital.

## **Educate yourself**

Mental illness is a medical disorder, not a character flaw or a sign of personal weakness. Learn as much as you can about your loved one's particular disorder, then try to understand the challenges he or she faces. Learn about the recommended treatment and how to get it. Remember that you can't be a therapist for your loved one. Professional help is essential for the person to get better, and your loved one may need your help in accepting that.

## **Medication issues**

Encourage medication use, but be prepared for resistance. Drug treatments for mental disorders have greatly improved, but side effects remain a problem for some people. Many people refuse medication because they don't think they are ill. Be respectful but persistent in urging your loved one to take prescribed medication. Many caregivers require medication to be taken as a condition for housing their loved one. Likewise, help your loved one keep therapy and medical appointments, and give feedback to health care providers who may need to adjust medications.

## **Attitudes affected**

Remember that the illness affects attitudes and beliefs. When a person says, "I am a total failure" or "I'll never feel

better,” remind your loved one that these feelings are a result of the illness. In cases where a person totally loses touch with reality, don’t argue. Trying to talk the person out of delusions won’t help. Proper treatment can restore realistic thinking. In the meantime, stay supportive and positive, but set boundaries and rules, especially if the person lives with you.

If your loved one lashes out or becomes agitated, stay calm and quiet. Try to find out what the problem is in a nonthreatening way. If a situation becomes abusive or frightening, call someone who can help, and get yourself to safety. Any threats of violence or suicide should always be taken seriously.

## **Create a support system**

Using all available resources will make it easier to deal with the unpredictability of the illness. For example, keep a list of phone numbers of therapists, doctors, family members, and friends who can help out. Also include the number of a suicide crisis line, substance abuse center, or mental health hospital in case of a crisis. This will help you and your loved one know that there is a safety net of people and resources available at all times. It will also keep the burden of care from resting completely on your shoulders.

Find support for yourself. It is important for you to live your own life as much as possible and take time for yourself and your interests. Your needs are important. It also helps to seek support from others in the same situation.