

Recognizing Mental Illness in Family and Friends

Watching a family or close friend experience a mental health challenge can be extremely difficult; not only for the affected individual but for those on the sidelines, offering support. Often, at first, coping with this new reality is insurmountable. Yet, over time, family, friends and loved ones gain the skills to manage these challenges effectively. And, for the individuals suffering from mental health challenges, **support from family and loved ones can be an essential element in their recovery process.**

As the supportive family or friend, it is best to educate yourself on mental health challenges, or the specific diagnosis, if there is one. Beyond that, here are some additional things to consider when helping a loved one through a challenge:

Do Not Assign Fault or Responsibility; Acceptance is Key

It is not your fault or responsibility to manage a loved one's mental health struggle. Instead, if symptoms worsen, which in some cases they do, remain empathetic. The situation is challenging and is not anyone's fault. In all cases, acceptance of the challenge or diagnosis, is a critical step in seeking treatment and improving outcomes. Mental health treatment is a journey which can involve multiple forms of medications and therapy. Acceptance and patience is critical.

Separate the Mental Health Challenge from the Person; Offer Compassion and Empathy

If you feel anger or resentment, try and direct that negative energy toward the illness rather than the person. This can be challenging, especially in cases where the symptoms seem personal. However, please remember challenging or uncharacteristic behavior can be a symptom of the disorder and the best way to help is to remain respectful, compassionate, and understanding. Certainly, offering practical support with transportation, finances and more can be helpful as well.

Care for the Caregiver

Make sure to take care of yourself. It is important for you to have your physical and emotional needs met, especially if you are the primary caretaker. Therefore, you may want to consider psychotherapy for yourself. These situations can lead to grief, guilt, fear, anger, sadness, hurt, confusion and more. A therapist can help. Support groups are also available for family members and can be a fantastic resource, giving you the space necessary to express yourself.

Specific Symptom Support

- If your loved one is suffering from delusions or hallucinations, do not try and convince them that their belief is not real
- Do not expect someone to simply "stop feeling depressed" or snap out of it. Individuals with diabetes do not "stop" being diabetic. Similarly, those with mental health challenges often cannot just stop.
- If you are involved with your loved one's treatment, consider requesting (with permission) information about the diagnosis and treatment plan

- If appropriate, do not be afraid to ask your loved one if he or she is thinking about harming themselves or suicide. Asking about it will NOT give them the idea; rather, it gives permission for them to speak openly and reach out for help