



## How to cope when a loved one has a serious mental illness

### How mental illnesses can affect family and friends

---

It's difficult to be diagnosed with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and major depressive disorder. It's also difficult when a loved one is experiencing one of these diseases. When a person is living with a serious mental illness, the whole family may be affected.

### Emotional upheaval

---

Serious mental illnesses often have a biological component. They are not the result of bad parenting, and they probably couldn't have been prevented by anything that you, as a friend or family member, might have done differently. Even still, after the diagnosis it's normal to feel a range of powerful — and often unpleasant — emotions.

It's not abnormal to feel ashamed, or hurt, or embarrassed by a family member whose behaviors can be difficult to understand and deal with. Many people also feel anger at the circumstances and even at the person who has been diagnosed. And though it may not be logical, parents often engage in some degree of self-blame. Such feelings of shame and anger may also go hand-in-hand with feelings of guilt. Grief is also common.

### If you are the parent of someone diagnosed with a serious mental illness

---

Parents, in particular, often have to readjust their hopes or expectations for the future when their child develops a serious mental illness. In the process, you may grieve for the future you thought your child would have. These feelings, though difficult, are totally normal.

Just as it's important to maintain your own health as you care for a loved one with mental illness, it's also important to preserve relationships with other family members, including your spouse or partner. If you have a child (whether a minor or an adult) with a serious mental illness, you may find yourself focusing less attention on your other children. Healthy siblings may feel anxiety and frustration at the extra responsibilities they are expected to take on. Try to regularly set aside a little one-on-one time with your other children. Tell them how much you appreciate their help. Clear, honest communication is crucial for all family members. For example, don't be afraid to ask both your ill and healthy children how they feel about the changes to the family. Keeping a line of communication open will help things go more smoothly — both at the time of a new diagnosis, and well into the future.

### If you are the partner of someone diagnosed with a serious mental illness

---

Relationships can be wonderful but challenging under the best of circumstances. When one partner has a serious mental illness, the situation can become even more complex. Many times, the partner without a diagnosed disorder will assume more responsibilities, at least for the short term. For a person who is already worried about what is happening with his or her partner, having to spend more time maintaining the household or taking care of the children can be especially hard.

It is important for the couple to keep in mind that most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness improve over time, and that a partner's attitude and behavior can make an important contribution to recovery. It helps to maintain an accepting and positive attitude, while holding realistic expectations for the partner with serious mental illness. Participating in specialized family therapy for serious mental illnesses can be very useful.

### Finding support

---

As you adjust to the emotions and stresses of loving someone with a serious mental illness, it's important to identify sources of support. Often, some of the best support comes from others who are in your shoes. Consider joining a family support group to meet others experiencing similar challenges. To find such a group, ask at your local hospitals or community mental health agency, or contact your local chapter of the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) (NAMI). Participating in family programs, in which you participate in education and treatment sessions with your loved one, can also be beneficial. Family-led programs, many led by trained instructors who themselves have a relative with mental illness, can help families learn how to cope. Furthermore, research has shown that family-based programs can also improve well-being for many people with serious mental illnesses.

When you discover a loved one is ill, it's often hard to focus your attention on anything else. But it's important to take care of your own needs. Try to eat healthy meals, get some exercise and get enough sleep. Making time to do things you enjoy will help you keep your stress levels in check. You'll be better able to support your loved one if you take steps to maintain your own physical and mental health.

Serious mental illnesses often present logistical challenges as well as emotional ones. Your family member may not be able to work, at least temporarily. You may need to help your loved one locate affordable housing, secure transportation to and from appointments, or figure out how to pay for and pick up medications. Ask your relative's doctors and mental health professionals if they know of any social services available in your community that may be able to help with these types of day-to-day activities. When possible, reach out to other friends and family members to help ease your responsibilities. You might be surprised how happy they are to lend a hand — if you let them.

It's normal for the family dynamic to change when one family member is diagnosed with a serious mental illness. It will probably take some time to accept those changes and establish a new routine. It helps to remember that people with serious mental illnesses can live rich, fulfilling lives — and so can you.

Thanks to Shirley M. Glynn, PhD, Karen Kangas, EdD, and Susan Pickett, PhD, for contributing to this article.