

## Supporting a family member with serious mental illness



### Learn how to help a loved one through diagnosis and beyond

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Mental illnesses are disorders that affect a person's mood, thoughts or behaviors. Serious mental illnesses include a variety of diseases including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and major depressive disorder. Although they can be scary, it is important to remember that these disorders are treatable. Individuals diagnosed with these diseases can live full, rewarding lives, especially if they seek treatment as needed.

Being diagnosed with a serious mental illness can be a shock — both for the person diagnosed and for his or her family and friends. On the other hand, finally obtaining a diagnosis and treatment plan can sometimes help relieve stress in the family and start moving recovery forward. Family members can be an invaluable resource for individuals dealing with serious mental illnesses. By learning more about the illness, you can support your loved one through diagnosis and beyond.

### Encouraging a loved one to seek help

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While symptoms of serious mental illnesses vary, the following signs are among the more common:

- Social withdrawal.
- Difficulty functioning at school or work.
- Problems with memory and thinking.
- Feeling disconnected from reality.
- Changes in sleeping, eating and hygiene habits.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Extreme mood changes.
- Thoughts of suicide.

If you're concerned a friend or family member is exhibiting these signs, try to stay calm. It's easy to imagine the worst-case scenario, but signs of mental illness often overlap with other problems. Consider whether there are other circumstances that might be affecting the person's mood or behavior. Did the person recently experience a shock, such as the death of a loved one? Have they recently lost a job or started a new school?

Regardless of your answers to those questions, don't let your fear of a diagnosis prevent you from encouraging your loved one to seek help. Start by talking to him or her. Express your concerns without using alarmist language or placing blame. You might say, "I've noticed that you seem more stressed than usual," or "I've noticed you don't seem like yourself lately." Then back up those statements with facts, pointing out changes in hygiene or daily activities, for example.

Encourage your loved one to talk to a trusted health care provider. If he or she is hesitant to see a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, suggest a visit to a general physician. Offer to accompany them to the appointment if they'd like.

If your family member doesn't take you up on your offer, consider alerting his or her physician's office with your concerns. Though the physician may not be able to share information with you due to privacy laws, it will give the doctor a head's up to be on the lookout for signs of mental health problems.

If you feel your loved one is in danger of harming himself or herself, or harming someone else, that's an emergency. Don't hesitate to call 911. If possible, ask for an officer trained in crisis intervention — many communities have officers on staff who are trained to diffuse a mental health crisis in the best possible way.

### A flurry of emotions

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It's entirely normal to experience a flurry of emotions when a loved one is diagnosed with a serious mental illness. Guilt, shame, disbelief, fear, anger and grief are all common reactions. Acceptance can take time, both for the diagnosed individual, for you and for other family members and friends. That acceptance happens at a different pace for everyone. Be patient with yourself and others.

One of the most important things you can do to support a family member with serious mental illness is to educate yourself. The more you learn about what to expect, the easier it will be to provide the right kind of support and assistance.

Familiarize yourself with the symptoms of the disease so that you are able to recognize when your family member might be showing signs that his or her illness is not well controlled.

Remember, too, that there's a lot of information on the Internet. Some of it is accurate. Some is wildly incorrect. Find trusted sources of information, and don't believe every horror story. (See "Resources" at the end of this article.)

### Balanced support

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Medications can be helpful for controlling symptoms of many serious mental illnesses. But they might take a while to become effective, and medication alone is often not enough to keep these diseases in check. Encourage your loved one to take advantage of other resources, such as peer support groups and individual and/or group psychotherapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy or social-skills training.

When a loved one is living with serious mental illness, it's easy to want to take charge. That's often especially true when the person is your own child or partner. But taking on complete responsibility for him or her isn't healthy for either of you. Individuals with serious mental illnesses are more likely to thrive when they are allowed to take appropriate responsibility for their own lives. Instead of driving your loved one to every appointment or errand, for instance, help him or her get a bus pass and learn the routes. Rather than preparing every meal for your loved one, teach him or her how to cook some simple, healthy meals.

Individuals with mental illnesses still have an identity, and they still have a voice. Engage your loved one in open and honest conversations. Ask what they're feeling, what they're struggling with and what they'd like from you. Work together to set realistic expectations and plan the steps for meeting those expectations. Recognize and praise your loved one's strengths and progress. Research shows that compared to offering positive support, repeatedly prompting or nagging people with serious mental illnesses to make behavior changes actually results in worse outcomes.

Unfortunately, people living with serious mental illness still experience stigma and misconceptions. While that can be a difficult reality, the fact is that people diagnosed today can expect better outcomes than ever before. Medications have improved, and new evidence-based psychotherapeutic interventions can have powerful and positive effects. So try to stay positive. One of the most important things you can do to support a loved one with serious mental illness is to have hope.

### Resources

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- [APA: How to Help in an Emotional Crisis](#).
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) – NAMI offers support and resources at the local, state and national level. Find your [local NAMI chapter](#).

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