eMentalHealth.ca

Supporting a Family Member or Friend with Mental Health Needs

Image credit: Adobe Stock

Summary: Chances are high that someone you know has a mental illness, because mental illnesses affect 1 in 5 directly, and can affect ANYONE. Mental illnesses are brain conditions, and individuals with brain conditions deserve our support, much as you would support someone with conditions in any other part of the body. Simple things like spending our time, listening and being helpful to the person are simple yet powerful ways we can show our love and support. When that is not enough, then family and friends can play a key role in helping our loved ones get support from health professionals.

Introduction

If someone you love is sick, it can be scary. When they are sick with a mental health issue it can be especially scary. It can be hard to see someone you love in pain and it's confusing when someone you know well is not acting like themselves. You know how you would take care of them if they had a cold or flu; but what do you do when their illness is a mental one? Just like if someone you love develops diabetes, someone with a mental illness needs extra love and support. You may not be able to see the illness, but it doesn't mean that you're powerless to help.

How do I know when to help?

Some signs that a friend or family member may have a mental disorder and could need your help are:

- They suddenly no longer have interest in hobbies and other interests they used to love
- They seem to feel angry or sad for little or no reason
- They don't seem to enjoy anything anymore
- They have told you about or seem to be hearing strange voices or having unsettling thoughts
- They seem emotionally numb, like they don't feel anything anymore
- They used to be healthy, but now they're always
- saying they feel a bit sick
- They eat a lot more or less than they used to
- Their sleep patterns have changed
- They seem to be anxious or terrified about situations or objects in life that seem normal to you and to others
- They've been missing more and more time from
- work or school
- They've been drinking heavily and/or using drugs to cope
- They are talking about taking their life or feeling hopeless

- They are avoiding their close friends and family members

How can I help?

Research confirms that support from family and friends is a key part of helping someone who is going through a mental illness. This support provides a network of practical and emotional help. These networks can be made up of parents, children, siblings, spouses or partners, extended families, close friends and others who care about us like neighbours, coworkers, coaches and teachers. Some people have larger networks than others, but most of us have at least a few people who are there for us when we need them.

There are a number of major ways that family and friends can help in someone's journey of recovery from a mental disorder:

- **Knowing when something is wrong—**or right: Getting help early is an important part of treating mental illness, and because they spend time with us, family and friends are often the first ones to notice that something is wrong. See "How do I know when to help?" on the next page for signs to watch for. Because finding a treatment that works is often a process of trial and error, family members may also be the first to see signs of improvement.
    - *How do I do this?* **TIP:** Learn more about the signs and symptoms of different mental illnesses. Also learn more about how treatments work so that you know what side effects you may see, when to look for improvements and which ones to look for first. A recent review found that when the family is educated about the illness, the rates of relapse in their loved ones were reduced by half in the first year.

- **Seeking help:** Families and friends can be important advocates to help loved ones get through those hard, early stages of having a mental disorder. They can help their loved one find out what treatment is best for them. They can also be key in letting professionals know what's going on, filling in parts of the picture that the person who's ill may not be well enough to describe on their own.
    - *How do I do this?* **TIP:** Offering to make those first appointments with a family doctor to find out what's wrong and/or accompanying the person who's unwell to the doctor can often be welcome to someone who may not have the energy or concentration to do it all by themselves. If you do accompany the person, work with them to write down any notes or questions either of you have in advance so that you cover all the major points. If they want to do it on their own, show them your support and ask them if there's anything you could do to help.
    - **TIP:** You can't always prevent a mental health crisis from happening. If your loved one needs to go to hospital, try and encourage them to go on their own. If they refuse and are very unwell, you can ensure the person gets treated in an emergency through BC's Mental Health Act. See our fact sheet on "Getting Help during Crises and Emergencies," so that you know what to do if this happens. The sheet also has resources to help prevent crises or prepare emergency plans in advance.

- **Helping with medications, appointments and treatments:** Because you spend so much time around your loved ones, you can help them remember to take their medications. You may also be able to help tell a doctor why medications aren't being taken as they should be. Similarly, you may be involved in reminding your loved one to do their counseling homework or use their light therapy treatment each morning, or to make or keep appointments for treatment.
    - *How do I do this?* **TIP:** If you're noticing that your loved one is having trouble taking their medication, you should mention it to their doctor or pharmacist. They can suggest ways to make pill taking easier. If there are other problems with taking medicine like side effects or other worries, encourage your loved one to write down their concerns and questions and talk to their doctor. If they don't have a good relationship with their doctor, help them find a new one. If cost is a barrier, learn about BC's no-charge psychiatric medication coverage called Plan G.
    - **TIP:** Suggest your loved one keep a symptom journal to track how they feel each day before, during and after treatment as well noting things that trigger more symptoms.

- **Supporting a healthy lifestyle:** Families can also help with day-to-day factors such as finances, problem solving, housing, nutrition, recreation and exercise, and proper sleeping habits.
    - How do I do this? TIP: See our Wellness Modules at www.heretohelp.bc.ca for practical tips on how to have a healthy lifestyle for both you and your loved onE.

    - TIP: Staff at mental health centres in your community may be able to help with life skills training as well as connections to income and housing.

- **Providing emotional support:** You can play an important role in helping someone who's not feeling well feel less alone and ashamed. They are not to blame for their illness, but they may feel that they are, or may be getting that message from others. You can help encourage hope.
    - *How do I do this?* **TIP:** Try to be as supportive, understanding and patient as possible. See our "Where do I go from here?" section for resources on how to be a good communicator.
    - **TIP:** Taking care of an ill family member or friend can be stressful. Remember that you need emotional support too. Consider joining a support group for family members of people with mental illness. There you can connect with other people going through the same things and they can help you work through your own emotions. It's very important to make sure you are taking care of your own mental health as well.

For more information

Contact the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) for more information. Web: www.cmha.ca

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to HeretoHelp for permission to reproduce this article. Original article title: "Supporting a Friend or Family Member with a Mental Disorder." Web: www.heretohelp.bc.ca