

Supporting a Loved One with Mental Health Illnesses

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It can be difficult and heartbreaking to watch a family member or friend struggle with mental illness. Family and friends can often feel helpless, but in reality they can make a huge difference in recovery process. Research confirms that support from family and friends is a key component in helping someone with a mental illness (*Supporting a Friend or Family Member with a Mental Illness*, n.d.).

Educate yourself.

A basic understanding of a loved one's situation is very helpful in deciding how to help them.

Dr. Lefley, a professor at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, believes it's important for families "to learn that they didn't cause [their loved one's disorder] and they can't cure it." However, she says there is a large body of evidence that shows that providing families with education, and involving them in the treatment process lessens symptoms, hospitalization days, and relapse in patients (Tartakovsky, 2016).

A family member is better helped when there is an understanding of what they're going through. This makes it easier to provide a safe space for them. Many people who suffer with mental health challenges feel it is necessary to hide what they're going through. Giving them a space to talk openly can be life changing.

Mental illnesses can be invisible, or nearly so. Because of this, it is vital to know subtle signs to watch for. These signs include a sudden lack of interest in hobbies or other things they used to love, being angry or sad for no reason, lack of excitement for life in general, social withdrawal, and sleep or appetite changes.

Start a conversation about what they're going through.

One of the hardest and most important steps is starting the conversation. As you do, reassure them that you care about *them*, and how they feel. The American Psychiatry Association suggests using "I" statements such as "I am worried about you....," "I would like you to consider talking with a counselor...." instead of "You are...." or "You should...." Keep your questions open-minded like "Why don't you tell me how you're feeling?" rather than "I can see you are feeling very low" (*For Friends and Family Members*, 2021).

Let them lead the conversation at their own pace. Allow them to share as much or as little as they are comfortable with. Opening up is very difficult, especially if they have kept this information to themselves.

Keep in mind you aren't there to be a fill-in for a therapist. You don't need to have all of the answers, and you certainly don't need to have a diagnosis. Simply express that you are there to listen to anything they have to say, and to help however possible. Try to show as much patience and compassion as you can, and listen without judgement.

Validate their feelings and the struggles they're going through.

To validate what your loved one is feeling, you must know what they are feeling. The easiest way to know? Ask! This is much better than assuming. Let them know that you are proud of them for fighting through their struggles. Some things you could tell your family member are:

- "I'm proud of you for still being here. I know it's not easy to fight and you're doing an amazing job."

- “I love you so much- even on your darkest days I am so grateful to have you in my life. Please never think you’re a burden to me, you are so far from it” (The Depression Project, 2021a).
- “Your struggles are a reflection of the symptoms of your mental illness, not your character.”
- “Your mental illness doesn’t define you- your resiliency through it does” (The Depression Project, 2021b).

Help them get the help they need.

If your family member needs help, having someone support them and encourage them will make the process much easier. There is a lot of unnecessary shame associated with needing help in all parts of life, but especially with mental health. Remind them that just like you can go to a doctor for a physical illness, you can go to a professional for mental health issues.

You can offer to make the first appointment with a family doctor or therapist. These steps can be hard if your family member doesn’t have much energy or has anxiety. Show your loved one support throughout the process and ask if there is anything you can do to help (*Supporting a Friend or Family Member with a Mental Illness*, n.d.).

By supporting your loved one, you can help make their journey much easier. If you need help right now, you can call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or reach the Crisis Text Line by texting “HOME” to 741741.

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