

Ask an Expert – Five Ways to Help Someone Struggling with Mental Health

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Observant family members can be the first responders to mental health or substance use concerns. Recognizing changes, listening without judgment, and simply being available can make a meaningful difference.

In recognition of World Mental Health Day on Oct. 10, Utah State University Extension's Health Extension: Advocacy, Research and Teaching (HEART) Initiative offers five strategies families can use to support loved ones facing mental health challenges.

1. Recognize the power of family support. Family members are often among the first to notice changes in behavior, routines, or emotional well-being. Because of these close relationships, families can provide an important support network and help people connect with treatment and other resources.

Families can also help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health treatment. In some situations, family therapy can help family members better understand how to support a loved one while strengthening relationships within the family.

2. Avoid stigmatizing language and beliefs. Words matter. Stigma can occur when differences or mental health conditions are labeled negatively, creating an "us vs. them" attitude.

People who experience stigma may feel isolated or discriminated against and may become less likely to seek help. Family members can create a safer environment by avoiding judgmental language and treating mental health and substance use disorders as health concerns that deserve understanding and appropriate care.

3. Be available, listen, and be patient. Social support can help people cope with stress, and feeling connected to others can benefit overall health. Families can provide that connection through face-to-face conversations, phone calls, texts, or video chats.

When talking with someone who is struggling, ask open-ended questions that let them explain what they are experiencing. Families may also benefit from discussing their history of mental health concerns. Understanding possible genetic predispositions can help people better understand their experiences and realize they are not alone.

Above all, be patient. Finding appropriate resources and treatment can take time.

4. Offer realistic hope. Hope is more than simply wishing things will improve. It can build resilience by acknowledging past difficulties while maintaining confidence in the future. Family members can offer hope by being genuine and drawing from shared experiences. A simple message such as, "We have been through difficult things before, and we can get through this together," can reassure them without minimizing what they're experiencing.

5. Take care of yourself. Supporting someone experiencing mental health or substance use concerns can be stressful. Family members and caregivers need to protect their own physical and emotional well-being and take appropriate steps for self-care.

Families should educate themselves about their loved one's treatment, ask appropriate questions, and communicate with those involved in their care when possible. Family or marriage therapy may also help rebalance relationships and promote healing.

For additional mental health resources and information, visit the [Utah State University Extension HEART Initiative](#) website, or call 988 for help.



5 Ways to Support a Loved One Facing Mental Health Challenges

Families can make a meaningful difference. These five strategies from the USU Extension HEART Initiative can help you support a loved one who may be experiencing mental health or substance use concerns.

- 1 Recognize Your Power**
Family members are often among the first to notice changes and can help connect loved ones with support and treatment. Families can also help reduce stigma and may benefit from family therapy.
- 2 Avoid Stigma**
Use respectful, nonjudgmental language. Stigma can make people feel isolated and less likely to seek help. Treat mental health and substance use concerns as health issues deserving understanding and compassion.
- 3 Be Available, Listen and Be Patient**
Reach out through a call, text, video chat or in person. Ask open-ended questions and really listen. Talk openly about your family's history of mental health concerns. Be patient—finding the right resources can take time.
- 4 Offer Realistic Hope**
Hope is more than a wish—it's an assurance built from lived experience. Be genuine, speak from your experience and remind your loved one that difficult times can be faced together.
- 5 Take Care of Yourself**
 - Eat well and exercise regularly.
 - Get adequate sleep and drink water.
 - Find healthy ways to relax and manage stress.
 - Talk with supportive family and friends.
 - Avoid excessive alcohol and other substances.
 - Seek support groups or professional help when needed.
 - Avoid guilt and harsh self-judgment.
 - Notice the positives, even when it's small.
 - Educate yourself about your loved one's treatment and consider family therapy.

USU Extension | HEART Initiative
Health Extension Advocacy, Research, and Teaching

Mental health, suicide, or substance use crisis? **Call or text 988.**

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