Helping a Loved One

When Someone You Care About Has a Mental Illness

Educating yourself is a first and necessary step toward helping loved ones who are ill. We've included lessons here on depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. But regardless of which mental illness your loved ones are dealing with, there are certain things you should know right from the start:

- Seek help right away if your loved ones say they want to hurt themselves. There are common signs that a person is suicidal, but do not try to diagnose the person yourself. If you suspect your loved ones are in danger of harming themselves, either seek emergency medical assistance or call a suicide help line at 1.800.SUICIDE (1.800.784.2433) or 1.800.273.TALK (1.800.273.8255).

- While you can help someone with a psychological disorder, you can't cure the disorder yourself. Instead, help your friend or family member seek out a qualified and experienced mental health professional so that he or she can receive a proper diagnosis and treatment plan. Too many people resist seeking this kind of help at the outset. Sometimes they don't know where to look. Other times they just don't want to make a "big deal" out of the problem. Too often, people resist seeking help out of fear that they'll be hospitalized or put on medication against their will.

  People are not confined or treated against their will, except in cases where they are an immediate danger to themselves or others. Waiting too long to get a proper diagnosis from an experienced professional and to begin treatment simply delays the time it will take to get better.

If your loved ones' behaviors or moods have changed suddenly or dramatically, it's a good idea to have them evaluated by a medical doctor who specializes in psychological disorders. This is because some medical conditions (such as thyroid problems or drug interactions) can manifest as psychological or emotional problems. A trained medical provider can help assess whether the problems are psychological in nature or caused by other medical conditions. This is especially relevant if your loved one is a child or an elderly person.

- Blaming yourself or your loved ones for their disorder helps no one. People generally don't cause themselves or others to have a mental illness, but let's break down how people often reach this erroneous conclusion:
  - When people we care about are stricken with a psychological disorder, it can be tempting to ruminate on things we said or did—or failed to do—that might have contributed to their illness. This is especially true for the parents of children with mental disorders. It's not helpful to get stuck in the past and on what could or might have been. Instead, learn about your loved ones' illness and do what you can—today—to support them and improve your relationship with them. You can also seek out help for yourself. Dwelling in remorse or shame helps no one.

  - Many people believe that those with depression are simply weak or that people with anxiety, mania or substance abuse problems could get better if they really wanted to. This is simply not the case. People can choose whether to seek help, follow professional advice or stay on treatment, but people with psychological disorders do not bring it on themselves.

- Your loved ones' most distressing behavior is likely caused by the illness. People in the grip of a mental illness often act against their own best interest, and they sometimes cause pain for those who love them. People with psychological disorders can make poor decisions, fail to show up for their responsibilities and engage in risky and compulsive behavior. They can also lash out in anger and say hurtful things, or withdraw completely from everyone around them. It is

important to recognize, however, that your loved ones would probably not engage in these behaviors if they weren't ill and that most of the behaviors will improve when they receive proper treatment.

- You will probably have to adjust your expectations of your loved ones. People with milder forms of depression and anxiety sometimes respond within several weeks of receiving treatment and return to good mental health within just a few months. Other people take much longer to get better, and they might suffer from recurrent episodes of their disorder throughout their lives. Either way, it's a good idea to revise your expectations for what the people you care about are able to do when they are ill. This includes their ability to engage fully in their relationship with you, to fulfill their responsibilities and, in some cases, to even take care of themselves.

- You do not have to tolerate being mistreated or neglected. While your friends or family members need your understanding, patience and support, there is no reason to tolerate being mistreated or neglected. In fact, setting good boundaries with your loved ones will often help them find the motivation to engage more actively in their own treatment. There are loving and less confrontational ways to talk to your loved ones about how their behavior is affecting you. Individual counseling and couples or family therapy are great places to learn how to best communicate with your loved ones.

- You have a right to ensure your own safety and the safety of others who are affected by the ill person. Seek immediate help if your family members or friends are putting your safety or the safety of others at risk, or if they're threatening or engaging in violent behavior. Trained crisis counselors and other mental health service providers can help you determine whether you or others are in danger and how to respond to threats to your safety. Your loved ones might be ill, and they do require understanding, but you should not tolerate violent or risky behavior.

- You can and should ask your loved ones how you can help them adhere to their treatment plan.

People with psychological disorders sometimes want to stop going to therapy when it gets difficult or when they encounter difficulties with their therapist. People might also miss their medication or want to stop it altogether—sometimes for quite valid reasons. Your loved ones' participation in their own care, however, can affect you. While your loved ones are the only ones who can ultimately decide whether to stick with their treatment, you can offer to help with the process and act as a kind of mirror to reflect their progress. Ask for permission to check in about their treatment and to tell them how you think they are doing. Asking first will also help ensure that your input is welcome.

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