

Supporting Your Relative's Recovery From a Mental Illness

Caring for a family member with a psychiatric illness can be challenging. Worries about your family member's future, including the potential for relapse, may weigh heavily on your mind. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to help your family member in their recovery. These include encouraging them to:

- Take medication as prescribed.
- Avoid drug and alcohol use.
- Participate in a rehabilitation program.
- Do something useful or productive with their time.
- Limit the amount of stress they experience by setting small achievable goals for oneself and taking breaks when needed.

MANAGING STRESS AND TENSION

Relatives of people with a mental illness can help manage stress in the family. Research has found that a positive family environment plays an important role in minimizing the progression of symptoms.

When interacting with a family member who has a psychiatric illness, you may benefit from trying to understand what they're experiencing — that is, putting yourself in their shoes. People with a mental illness have to cope with disturbing symptoms and the side effects of prescribed medication. These experiences may feel overwhelming and cause tension, anxiety, and confusion — for both the person with the illness and those who care about them.

AVOIDING HARMFUL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

The stress of having a family member with a mental illness can make you feel irritable or on edge. You may be tempted to prompt or nag your family member about getting things under control. However, these communication patterns are associated with higher rates of relapse.

Severe criticism, even if done for your family member's good, often has a negative effect. Repeated prompting, correcting, and fault-finding may worsen mental illness symptoms. Reducing the frequency of these behaviors can lower everyone's stress level.

Try to become more aware of your behaviors toward your family member so that you can avoid ineffective prompting or criticism. For example, instead of criticizing them, try praising positive changes they've made, no matter how small the changes seem.

Focus on the positive rather than the negative whenever possible.

ASK YOURSELF ...

What are two things your relative with a mental illness has recently accomplished? How can you praise them for those things?

SHOWING YOU CARE WITHOUT GOING OVERBOARD

You may feel the need to be extra watchful in caring for a family member with a mental illness. Perhaps you are reluctant to leave them unsupervised and have cut back on work or social activities to spend more time with them. However, your family member may be acutely sensitive to external pressure. They could find this additional supervision stressful and withdraw even more. And seeing you refuse social, career, or leisure opportunities on their behalf may make them feel guilty.

Research shows that self-sacrificing behavior may have the unintended effect of worsening symptoms. In short, make sure you maintain activities or pursue opportunities you find worthwhile, even though your family member is still recovering.

Continue to live your own life in addition to caring for your family member.

Most people with a mental illness can reduce the frequency of relapses by taking their medication as prescribed and avoiding drugs and alcohol. You too can make a difference for a relative with a mental illness by paying attention to how you interact with them. By avoiding criticism, nagging, and extreme self-sacrificing behavior, you can help reduce stress within the family — helping your relative avoid relapse and improving their treatment outcome.

*Two good mottos: Don't sweat the small stuff.
Choose your battles wisely.*

SUMMARY

- You can be an important influence in your family member's recovery from a mental illness.
- Conflict in families can increase stress, which can make symptoms of a mental illness worse.
- Paying attention to the positive helps reduce stress.
- It is also important to take care of yourself and have some fun in life.

