

Mental Illness - Information for Families

by Vicki Koenig, PhD.

If one of your family members has been diagnosed with mental illness, then you and your family, no doubt, are experiencing a number of concerns, emotions and questions about these disorders. The following information is intended to inform you about mental illness and also to provide you and your family with coping skills which will be helpful to you. In hearing that one of your family members has a mental illness, you may have already experienced emotions such as shock, sadness, anxiety, confusion, etc. These are not uncommon emotions, given the fact that the diagnosis of mental illness has carried a lot of negative associations in our society. What is important to understand and keep in mind is that the negative stigma associated with the diagnosis of mental illness has drastically changed over the course of the last few years. In the past in our society, most mental illness was classified as a family disorder, and families tended to be blamed by professionals rather than supported. Research and the development of new and effective psychotropic medications and treatment approaches have changed this concept, and professionals no longer place blame upon family members. Mental illnesses are disorders of the brain (a biological condition), where environmental and sociological factors play a part in the development of the disorder. In the past few years, we have seen major developments, progress and changes in all areas of psychiatric research which suggest that mental illness can be managed and success in recovery can be achieved. Statistically, recovery from mental illness is a reality. It does appear, however, that each person diagnosed with mental illness has a different rate of recovery, and therefore it is important for you as family members to come to accept varying degrees of recovery for your loved one. It is also important to accept your feelings and seek out help to deal with them. Remember, having feelings as mentioned above is a normal process for all family members. For you and your other family members, it is also imperative to understand and have support. The diagnosis of mental illness is much like a physical diagnosis such as cancer, MS, etc. Therefore, some of the emotions that you may be experiencing are about loss and grief. There is no question that any major illness affects the whole family and changes the way everyone goes about their daily life. To deal with loss and grief issues is not an easy matter. There are, however, two major things to remember about the grieving process. The first is to allow yourself to feel. To do this you may need supportive counseling, good friends, or you may want to consider joining a support group. Some other suggestions are shown below. The second and perhaps most important is to come to accept and let go. As Elizabeth Kubler Ross suggests, one must first go through the stages of loss in order to come to the place of acceptance. These stages revolve around the primary emotions of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. As family members, you will need to access information and be in an environment in which professionals working with your loved one are sensitive to your needs and the grieving process associated with this illness. The following are some

suggestions for families and a few ways to cope and deal with your feelings and concerns. It is important that wherever you send your loved one for help, you get positive support and are not being blamed for your loved one's illness. Remember that you and your loved one do have a right to be informed and to make choices that work for you. Suggestions for your initial contact with professionals and organizations that can assist with your loved one's illness and your understanding of it:

1. Seek out a psychiatrist who seems to have an active involvement with the community resources available to families. You can ask questions such as how long has the psychiatrist worked with mental illness, what his/her knowledge is of psychotropic medication, what his/her philosophy is related to mental illness and family dynamics.

It is important that the psychiatrist is able to refer you to qualified adjunctive professionals and programs, such as psychologists, social workers or treatment programs. Psychotropic medications can markedly improve symptoms and you can ask questions about the drugs used and their side effects, etc. If you feel comfortable with the primary psychiatrist, it makes the rest of treatment much easier to deal with. So ask questions.

2. If your psychiatrist has referred you to Community Resources such as Psychologists and/or MFT's for supportive community or other treatment programs, check them out and ask questions about their philosophy and experience.
3. Connect with one or more of the associations in your area to gain more understanding and connect with other families experience the same concerns, feelings, etc.

The list below will assist in checking to see if any of these are in your area. If not, you can write or call to find out where the closest meeting might be. These resources have been found to be invaluable to families, providing on-going support and helping to manage the ongoing issues that arise from this illness.

NAMI

200 N. Glebe Road, Suite 1015
Arlington, VA 22203-3754
703-524-7600

or call the NAMI Helpline at

800-950-NAMI (800-950-6264)

National Depressive & Manic-Depressive Association

730 N. Franklin St., Suite 501

Chicago, IL 60610-3526

800-82-NDMDA (800)-826-3632)

National Mental Health Association (NMHA)

National Mental Health Information Center

1021 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-2971

Suggestions for dealing with your emotions and feelings:

1. Accept the illness and its difficult consequences. This is easier said than done; however, research suggests that families who deal most successfully with a mentally ill relative are those who can find a way to accept them fully.
2. Develop realistic expectations for the ill person and yourself. Do not expect to always feel happy and accept your right to have your feelings. Feelings are a normal process. Often families experience guilt and other emotions which they try to repress or pretend do not exist. This can only result in emotions and feelings building up and often other physical or emotional problems arising. Remember, adjusting to mental illness for you and your loved one takes time, patience and a supportive environment. Also, recovery is slow sometimes. So it is best to support your loved one by praising him/her for small achievements. Try not to expect too much or that your mentally ill family member will return to their previous level of functioning too quickly. Some people can return to work or school, etc., quite quickly, and others may not be able to. Comparing your situation with others can be very frustrating, and we suggest that you keep in mind that what works for someone else may not work for you or your loved one. This will help to reduce frustration.
3. Accept all the help and support you can get.
4. Develop a positive attitude and even better, keep a sense of humor.
5. Join a support group (listed above).
6. Take care of yourself - seek out counseling and support.
7. Do healthy activities like hobbies, recreation, vacations, etc.
8. Eat right, exercise, and stay healthy.
9. Stay optimistic.

Experts on mental illness believe that new research discoveries are bringing deeper understanding of mental illness, which are resulting in even more effective treatments. Suggestions for what families can do to help:

1. Assist your family member to find effective medical treatment. To find a psychiatrist, you may contact your own medical doctor or check with NAMI (listed above). You may also call or write the American Psychiatric Association.
2. Seek consultation regarding financial consideration for treatment. You may call your local Social Security office and check with your family member's health insurance. Often quality treatment is not pursued because of financial considerations.
3. Learn as much as you can about the mental illness with which your family member has been diagnosed.
4. Recognize warning signs of relapse.

5. Find ways to handle symptoms. Some suggestions are: Try not to argue with your loved one if they have their hallucinations or delusions (as the person believes it is real); do not make fun of or criticize them; and especially do not act alarmed. The more calm you can be, the better it is.
6. Be happy with slow progress and allow your loved one to feel O. K. with a little success.
7. If your family member is out of control or suicidal (harm to self or others), stay calm and call 911. Do not try to handle it alone.