



Supporting the family of a person living with mental illness

1. Do not blame the family!

The family of the person living with mental health challenges can neither cause nor fix their family member's illness. They need understanding and support as they can feel embarrassed about their family member's behaviours from time to time.

2. Show compassion and empathy!

The family are often tired, frustrated and this is best ameliorated by your understanding and encouragement. Let them talk about what it is like and vent if they need to without judgement or fear. That enables them to go back and continue to patiently walk alongside their loved one as the journey is a long and lonely one for many family members. The less hostile or critical they are with their family members the less likely that person is to relapse. So supporting the family has a direct impact on wellbeing of the person.

3. Know what you are dealing with!

It helps to find out a bit about the illness the family are dealing with, so educate yourself about the illness from reliable sources. This helps to build your tolerance, understanding and empathy.

- Mueser KT, Gingerich S (2006) *The Complete Family Guide to Schizophrenia: Helping Your Loved One Get the Most Out of Life*. NY, USA: The Guilford Press.
- Torrey EF (2013) *Surviving Schizophrenia* NY, USA: Harper Collins
- Miklowitz, DJ (2011) *The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide: What You and Your Family Need to Know*. NY, USA: The Guilford Press.

4. People cannot snap out of it!

Diseases such as schizophrenia, bipolar, deep depression have serious symptoms for the person. Families and friends often want the person to "snap out of it". The person's thoughts and actions are usually not under their control and it is not wilful strange behaviour it is a manifestation of the illness. The person usually does not have insight into their bizarre behaviour so they cannot comprehend the impact it has on others.

5. Keep the expectations realistic!

After a person has been admitted into hospital well intentioned people may think that the person is "fixed" before discharge. Some mental illness is chronic. It can be managed but it may never be completely cured! Continually fine tuning the expectations along the trajectory of the illness helps to maintain an optimistic and realistic set of expectations for everyone.



6. Keep the stressors on the family low!

Support them as they require. Ask them how it would be best to provide them with the support they need to continue to be an effective carer. Consider short and longer respite help if its needed. Don't step in and take over! Rather, ask how you can best help and stick to that.

7. When the family do reach out for support – provide it.

The stigma of mental illness stops a lot of people asking for help. Many have had bad experiences from well-intentioned people. Appropriate support that bolsters the family's strengths can build resilient families. Helping them find networks of people coping with similar issues can help.

8. Encourage Involvement with MH team! Urge the family to be a part of the MH team's case management of their loved one. In this way they have input into a care plan that is more likely to work toward recovery. They may need support to do this if they lack confidence.

9. Pray for the family!

The person living with MH issues and their family may want the regular support of prayer. Recognise that they may need this kind of prayer support for a long time. Recovery is possible but it may take time and relapses may occur.

10. Include and embrace!

The family and the person living with mental illness are an important part of your faith community. Including them is not an act of compassion or charity, it is actually important for the health and wellbeing of your whole community. Each person as an image bearer of Christ has been created with unique gifts, strengths, talents that are needed by the body of Christ – your church. They are an important and necessary part of your community and need to be included and embraced as equals. This can mean church may get 'messy' at times and it can be 'challenging', but it is essential if we are to reflect what it means to be made whole in Christ.

[This article is based on information gleaned from Tartakovsky, M. (2011). 15 Ways To Support a Loved One with Serious Mental Illness. *Psych Central*. Retrieved on November 14, 2014, from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/15-ways-to-support-a-loved-one-with-serious-mental-illness/0007039>]

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