**Family Members And Caregivers**

When a friend or family member develops a mental health condition, it's important to know that you're not alone. Many Americans have experienced caring for a person with mental illness. 1 in 25 Americans lives with a serious mental health condition. Mental health professionals have effective treatments for most of these conditions, yet in any given year, only 60% of people with a mental illness get mental health care.

As a result, family members and caregivers often play a large role in helping and supporting them. Millions of people have experienced the thoughts and questions you might be having now.

You may be trying to help a family member who doesn't have access to care or doesn't want help. Or you may want to learn how to support and encourage someone who has been hospitalized or experienced a similar mental health crisis.

We realize that the challenges of mental illness do not only affect an individual's family members but also friends, teachers, neighbors, coworkers and others in the community. Here we use the terms family member and caregiver interchangeably to refer to someone giving emotional, financial or practical support to a person with a mental health condition. Whether you're providing a lot of assistance or very little, the information here can help you better understand the issues that you might face.

**Maintaining A Healthy Relationship**

Relating to someone you love who has a mental illness can be difficult and frustrating, but there are strategies you can use to improve your communication with them. There may be a lot you don’t know about how your relative sees things when they’re symptomatic. These tips can help you build a stronger foundation for your relationship.

To get started on a better path in your relationship with your family member, first acknowledge that you can’t change them, only yourself. But the changes you make can improve your lives together. It’s critical to know as much as you can about their illness so you understand what they may be going through.

**Don’t Buy Into Stigma**

Be clear with yourself about who the person you care about really is. Even if we’re very close to someone with mental illness and advocate for his rights, we may also have our own preconceptions and false beliefs about mental illness. We have to learn to separate the illness from the person.

**Understand Confusing Behavior**

Because many of the symptoms of mental illness express themselves through social behavior, it’s natural to feel hurt by the symptoms. We tend to assume behavior is conscious and deliberate.

For example, when you invite your brother to dinner with friends and you feel embarrassed by his obsessive checking of whether he locked his car, you’re tempted to see him as someone who’s choosing to embarrass you. This may be how some friends and strangers see him, too—that’s the effect of stigma. When people around you see your relative this way, it can be hard to remember the truth: that he has an illness, and that the behavior is part of his symptoms. That doesn’t excuse cruel or violent behavior, but it’s an important reality to keep in mind.

**See Opportunities For Improvement**

You and your relative can still make conscious choices that improve your situation. You may agree to cooperate on communicating better, you may each work on keeping up friendships and other supportive relationships, you may each see a psychologist for talk therapy. The fact that you can control some things some of the time doesn’t negate the fact that the illness is real, not a character flaw, or anyone’s fault. Your relative’s capacity to make positive choices will depend on how severe her symptoms are at any given time.

**Get Support From Other People**

You know there's more to your loved one than her illness. You may value her sense of humor, her familiarity with your past, her ability to listen and her advice. When someone has a mental illness, she may feel it threatens her identity and self-respect. As with any other illness, your loved one will have periods when she's learning to cope with her illness’ challenges. During these times, she may seem self-absorbed and unable to give her usual attention and energy to others.

Both you and your relative will be better able to cope if you expand your own support network, beyond her. Strengthen your connections with other friends and family. This takes some pressure off your relative to help you as she did before she was ill. She can instead put that energy toward moving toward living well. At the same time, you may resent her less and feel strengthened by getting the social support you need.

**Expect Decent Behavior**

Making adjustments to accommodate for your relative’s illness doesn’t erase the need for basic structures and expectations. Tell your relative the standards you need him to meet so you can live well together. Make sure your loved one knows that you see him as a whole person, and that you expect him to follow those standards.

Two of the most important standards to meet are that your home is a safe space and that you have a plan for what to do when safety of your loved one or the family is threatened. Prepare yourself and your family to handle crises. Tell your relative about the standards you expect for daily life. For example, that you won’t continue an interaction with your father if he starts screaming at you. Use the communication tips below to have more productive conversations with your relative.

**Learn To Communicate Effectively**

Developing good communication skills will improve all of your relationships, but they’re especially important when mental illness is in the mix. Effective communication is largely about building good habits. You can make choices that improve your chances of getting the results you want. Maybe you want to be able to ask your granddaughter to shower without getting into an argument, or tell your husband his smoking worries you without him giving you the cold shoulder.

A very good way to approach this is to use statements that give your perspective, rather than imposing perceived behavior. For example, try "I am concerned because you don't seem interested in what I'm saying.", instead of "You're not listening." Making thoughtful changes to how you communicate can move you closer to your goals.

**See It From Their Perspective**

Learn as much as you can about your relative’s illness and what they experience. Because of their symptoms, they may perceive things differently than you think. They may be feeling strong emotions like fear, have low self-esteem or be experiencing a delusion or hallucination. All this may be going on even if they don’t express it.

Put yourself in their shoes and try to think about how they’re feeling, rather than only what they’re saying. Adjusting your communication style with their possible experience in mind respects them, and makes it more likely that they’ll really hear and understand you.

If your friend or relative has done something that bothers you, give them the benefit of the doubt by first assuming the problem is not that they’re not motivated to change, but that they’re not yet able. It can be tempting to assume that the person is deliberately being difficult. Maybe your loved one doesn’t particularly like cleaning up, but she means well. She gets distracted in the moment and forgets to clean, even though she knows she’s supposed to. Ask her if something is making it harder for her to clean. If she simply forgets, would a sign on the kitchen door or fridge help? What does she think the sign should say? Ask her for ideas, so you’re cooperating on something.

You’ll notice that in this example, you’re still able to express the core of how you feel: you’re upset by the person’s actions, and you want them to behave differently because you’ll feel better. This method of communication is less likely to pile on the resentment—both theirs and yours—and more likely to get you both what you want.

**Focus On Your Larger Goals**

When you’re upset, try to remind yourself what your true, long-term goal is. It may be to live peacefully with your partner, or to encourage your child to eat more healthily. Your true goal is probably not to win an argument or to remind them of how much you put up with for their sake, but when we’re upset, we can get defensive.

Start conversations soon after something happens that upsets you, but after you’ve had a few minutes to cool down and talk calmly. You’ll be more likely to agree on recent facts, and you won’t let dissatisfactions build and worsen into resentment. Pursuing your larger goals doesn’t mean burying your feelings; it means communicating your most important feelings well.

**Use Direct, Simple And Clear Language**

To have a more productive conversation, start off on the right foot. Get the person’s attention first (“Can I talk to you?”). Cover one topic at a time and share small amounts of information at once (“I want to talk about tonight’s dinner”). Say exactly what you mean (“It’s been a long time since we cooked together, and I miss doing that. Would you help me make dinner tonight?”) rather than hinting at it (“You never do anything with me anymore”).

**Describe What You Want And Why**

State the facts of the situation, because usually that’s an area in which you can agree (“These forms are due back to your school tomorrow, and you haven’t filled them out yet.”). Say exactly what action you’re requesting the person to take, and how you’d feel if they’d do that (“Please read and sign them before we have lunch. I’d feel relieved knowing they’re done, and we can enjoy the rest of the afternoon knowing you’re ready for school”).

Describing a positive outcome can be very motivating. For example, you could say that you’d appreciate their help taking the trash out, or that if they joined you for a walk you’d be happy to be spending time together. Ask the person for suggestions on how to improve the situation; if they help create the idea, they’re more likely to give it a try.

**Taking Care Of Yourself**

To be able to care for the people you love, you must first take care of yourself. It’s like the advice we’re given on airplanes: put on your own oxygen mask before trying to help someone else with theirs. Taking care of yourself is a valid goal on its own, and it helps you support the people you love.

Caregivers who pay attention to their own physical and emotional health are better able to handle the challenges of supporting someone with mental illness. They adapt to changes, build strong relationships and recover from setbacks. The ups and downs in your family member’s illness can have a huge impact on you. Improving your relationship with yourself by maintaining your physical and mental health makes you more resilient, helping you weather hard times and enjoy good ones. Here are some suggestions for personalizing your self-care strategy.

**Understand How Stress Affects You**

Stress affects your entire body, physically as well as mentally. Some common physical signs of stress include:

* Headaches
* Low energy
* Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation and nausea
* Aches, pains, and tense muscles
* Insomnia

Begin by identifying how stress feels to you. Then identify what events or situations cause you to feel that way. You may feel stressed by grocery shopping with your spouse when they’re symptomatic, or going to school events with other parents who don’t know your child’s medical history. Once you know which situations cause you stress, you’ll be prepared to avoid it and to cope with it when it happens.

**Protect Your Physical Health**

* Improving your physical wellbeing is one of the most comprehensive ways you can support your mental health. You’ll have an easier time maintaining good mental habits when your body is a strong, resilient foundation.
* Exercise daily. Exercise can take many forms, such as taking the stairs whenever possible, walking up escalators, and running and biking rather than driving. Joining a class may help you commit to a schedule, if that works best for you. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall health.
* Eat well. Eating mainly unprocessed foods like whole grains, vegetables and fresh fruit is key to a healthy body. Eating this way can help lower your risk for chronic diseases, and help stabilize your energy levels and mood.
* Get enough sleep. Adults generally need between seven and nine hours of sleep. A brief nap—up to 30 minutes—can help you feel alert again during the day. Even 15 minutes of daytime sleep is helpful. To make your nighttime sleep count more, practice good “sleep hygiene,” like avoiding using computers, TV and smartphones before bed.
* Avoid alcohol and drugs. They don’t actually reduce stress and often worsen it. If you’re struggling with substance use, click here for helpful resources.
* Practice relaxation exercises. Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are easy, quick ways to reduce stress. When conflicts come up between you and your family member, these tools can help you feel less controlled by turbulent feelings and give you the space you need to think clearly about what to do next.

**Recharge Yourself**

When you’re a caregiver of someone with a condition like mental illness, it can be incredibly hard to find time for yourself, and even when you do, you may feel distracted by thinking about what you “should” be doing instead. But learning to make time for yourself without feeling you’re neglecting others—the person with the illness as well as the rest of your family—is critical.

Any amount of time you take for yourself is important. Being out of “caregiver mode” for as little as five minutes in the middle of a day packed with obligations can be a meaningful reminder of who you are in a larger sense. It can help keep you from becoming consumed by your responsibilities. Start small: think about activities you enjoyed before becoming a caregiver and try to work them back into your life. If you used to enjoy days out with friends, try to schedule a standing monthly lunch with them. It becomes part of your routine and no one has to work extra to make it happen each month.

The point is not what you do or how often you do it, but that you do take the time to care for yourself. It’s impossible to take good care of anyone else if you’re not taking care of yourself first.

**Practice Good Mental Habits**

**Avoid Guilt**

Try not to feel bad about experiencing negative emotions. You may resent having to remind your spouse to take his medication, then feel guilty. It’s natural to think things like “a better person wouldn’t be annoyed with their spouse,” but that kind of guilt is both untrue and unproductive. When you allow yourself to notice your feelings without judging them as good or bad, you dial down the stress and feel more in control. When you feel less stressed, you’re better able to thoughtfully choose how to act.

**Notice The Positive**

When you take the time to notice positive moments in your day, your experience of that day becomes better. Try writing down one thing each day or week that was good. Even if the positive thing is tiny (“It was a sunny day”), it’s real, it counts and it can start to change your experience of life.

**Gather Strength From Others**

NAMI support groups exist to reassure you that countless other people have faced similar challenges and understand your concerns. Talking about your experiences can help. The idea that you can, or should be able to, “solve” things by yourself is false. Often the people who seem like they know how to do everything are actually frequently asking for help; being willing to accept help is a great life skill. If you’re having trouble keeping track of your sister’s Medicaid documents and you’ve noticed your coworker is well-organized, ask them for tips about managing paperwork.

You may feel you don’t have the time to stay in touch with friends or start new friendships. Focus on the long-term. If you can meet up with a friend once a month, or go to a community event at your local library once every two months, it still helps keep you connected. It also gives you the chance to connect with people on multiple levels. Being a caregiver is an important part of your life, but it’s not the whole story.

**Be Prepared for a Crisis**

No one wants to worry about the possibility of a crisis, but they do happen. That doesn't mean you have to feel powerless. Many healthcare providers require patients to create a crisis plan, and may suggest that it be shared with friends and family. Ask your loved one if he has developed a plan.

A Wellness Recovery Action Plan can also be very helpful for your loved one to plan his overall care, and how to avoid a crisis. If he will not work with you on a plan, you can make one on your own. Be sure to include the following information:

* Phone numbers for your loved one’s therapist, psychiatrist and other healthcare providers
* Family members and friends who would be helpful, and local crisis line number
* Phone numbers of family members or friends who would be helpful in a crisis
* Local crisis line number (you can usually find this by contacting your NAMI Affiliate, or by doing an internet search for “mental health crisis services” and the name of your county)
* Addresses of walk-in crisis centers or emergency rooms
* The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
* Your address and phone number(s)
* Your loved one’s diagnosis and medications
* Previous psychosis or suicide attempts
* History of drug use
* Triggers
* Things that have helped in the past
* Mobile Crisis Unit phone number in the area (if there is one)
* Determine if police officers in the community have Crisis Intervention Training (CIT)
* Go over the plan with your loved one, and if he is comfortable doing so, with his doctor. Keep copies in several places. Store a copy in a drawer in your kitchen, your glove compartment, on your smartphone, your bedside table, or in your wallet. Also, keep a copy in a room in your home that has a lock and a phone.

**Psychiatric Advance Directives**

You may also want to ask about a Psychiatric Advance Directive (PAD), which is a legal document that allows a second party to act on your loved one's behalf if he becomes acutely ill and unable to make decisions about treatment. The PAD is written by your loved one when they are currently ‘competent.’ It details the individual’s preferences for treatment should they become unable to make such decisions due to their mental health condition. Planning ahead can make a huge difference in your loved one’s treatment experience in the future.

**Conservatorship**

In some cases, a person who is suicidal refuses to seek or accept treatment. They may engage in self-harm, risky behaviors and multiple suicide attempts. Oftentimes a person in this condition has a serious underlying mental illness that they refuse treatment for. Unfortunately, because they present such a significant danger to themselves, they may need someone else to make these decisions for them.

A conservatorship is a legal relationship granted by a court that allows one person (the conservator) to make personal decisions for another (the ward), who has shown themselves to be unable to fulfill the basic requirements needed to protect their own health and safety. Unless otherwise specified, the conservator has all of the powers that a parent has over a minor, which would allow the conservator to direct the ward’s mental health treatment and suicide prevention measures.

**Calling 911 And Talking With Police**

If a situation escalates into a crisis, you may have to call the police. Thankfully, there are a few things you can do to keep the situation as calm as possible.

**On The Phone**

Share all the information you can with your 911 operator. Tell the dispatcher that your loved one is having a mental health crisis and explain her mental health history and/or diagnosis. If the police who arrive aren't aware that a mental health crisis is occurring, they cannot handle the situation appropriately. Many communities have crisis intervention team (CIT) programs that train police officers to handle and respond safely to psychiatric crisis calls. Not every police officer is trained in a CIT program, but you should ask for a CIT officer if possible.

**During A Crisis**

Police are trained to maintain control and ensure safety. If you are worried about a police officer overreacting, the best way to ensure a safe outcome is to stay calm. When an officer arrives at your home, say "this is a mental health crisis." Mention you can share any helpful information, then step out of the way. Yelling or getting too close to the officer is likely to make him feel out of control. You want the officer as calm as possible.

Be aware that your loved one may be placed in handcuffs and transported in the back of a police car. This can be extremely upsetting to witness, so be prepared.

**What Can The Police Do?**

* Transport a person who wants to go to the hospital. A well-trained CIT officer can often talk to a person who is upset, calm him down and convince him to go to the hospital voluntarily.
* Take a person to a hospital for an involuntary evaluation. In certain circumstances, police can force a person in crisis to go to the hospital involuntarily for a mental health evaluation. The laws vary from state to state.
* Check on the welfare of your family member if you are worried about her or can't reach her. Call the non-emergency number for the police department in your community and explain why you are concerned. Ask them to conduct a welfare check.
* If you have questions about the laws in your state, talk to your local police department or contact your local NAMI.

**Preventing Suicide**

It can be frightening and intimidating when a loved one reveals or shows signs of suicidal thoughts. However, not taking thoughts of suicide seriously can have a devastating outcome. If you think your friend or family member will hurt herself or someone else, call 911 immediately. There are a few ways to approach this situation.

* Remove means such as guns, knives or stockpiled pills
* Calmly ask simple and direct questions, such as “Can I help you call your psychiatrist?” rather than, “Would you rather I call your psychiatrist, your therapist or your case manager?”
* Talk openly and honestly about suicide. Don’t be afraid to ask questions such as “Are you having thoughts of suicide?” or “Do you have a plan for how you would kill yourself?”
* If there are multiple people, have one person speak at a time
* Ask what you can do to help
* Don’t argue, threaten or raise your voice
* Don’t debate whether suicide is right or wrong
* If your loved one asks for something, provide it, as long as the request is safe and reasonable
* If you are nervous, try not to fidget or pace
* If your loved one is having hallucinations or delusions, be gentle and sympathetic, but do not get in an argument about whether the delusions or hallucinations are real
* If you are concerned about suicide and don’t know what to do, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). They have trained counselors available 24/7 to speak with either you or your loved one.

**Providing Support**

Even if your loved one isn't in a moment of crisis, you need to provide support. Let her know that she can talk with you about what she is going through. Make sure that you are actively and openly listening to the things she says. Instead of arguing with any negative statements that she makes, try providing positive reinforcement. Active listening techniques such as reflecting feelings and summarizing thoughts can help your loved one feel heard and validated. Furthermore, reassuring your loved one that you are concerned for her well-being will encourage her to lean on you for support.

**Be Educated**

One of the best things you can do if you know or suspect that your loved one is contemplating suicide is educate yourself. Learning about suicide, what the warning signs are, and how it can be prevented can help you understand what you need to do as a member of their support system.

**If Possible, Be Prepared**

If your friend or family member has had suicidal thoughts in the past, it's a good idea to have a crisis plan just in case. This means that you'll need to work together to develop the best course of action if a crisis situation should occur.