

Family ties: coping with a relative's mental illness

Coping with a relative's illness is incredibly challenging and something many people aren't prepared to handle. Though you probably want to offer as much love and support as possible, defensive or unpredictable behaviour can be a challenge and you may find that caring for your loved one eats up much of your free time and energy. The result can be a physically and emotionally exhausting journey that may not only leave you feeling exhausted, but also exposed to the opinions and judgments of others.

Start by learning all you can about your loved one's mental illness so you can understand the challenges he or she is facing. Then, learn to boost your coping credentials without the scenario absorbing your entire life by:

Acknowledging your feelings. In the short term it may be easier to ignore the warning signs of a mental health issue in a loved one, but remember: the sooner a problem is addressed, the better the chances for a successful recovery. Though you may worry about what others will think, accept these concerns and quickly move on to taking action. Your time will be much better spent ensuring your relative gets the help he or she needs.

Avoiding the blame game. No one is to blame for your loved one's mental illness. Though most of us would never dream of laying blame on someone for getting multiple sclerosis or cancer, the same cannot be said of mental illness. Remember that mental health illnesses are often caused by chemical imbalances in the brain rather than "weakness." While it may seem easier for family members to find something or someone to point the finger at, this is a time when you will really need to pull together as a family. Alienation will only burden the family with more stress.

Accepting help. Don't try to single-handedly "cure" your loved one's mental illness and don't take on the whole responsibility of recovery by yourself. You can't be there all the time and if you try, you'll not only burn out, but will ultimately end up hindering your relative's recovery. Accept help from others when they offer and ask them for help if they don't.

Talking about it. While it may be difficult to talk about your relative's mental illness with other family members and friends, holding back can lead to emotional and social isolation at a time when you really need all the support you can get. Giving yourself permission to talk about what is going on with a trusted friend, relative, support group or professional can help you work through stress and tension, leaving you feeling more open and patient when dealing with your ill relative.

Be realistic. Keep an open mind about your loved one's recovery and be sure your expectations are realistic. Take a 'one-day-at-a-time' approach: it may take your loved one longer than you think for 'normal' life to resume. Remember that this is your relative's journey, not your own, so don't push too hard. Give your loved one time and space to work through his or her own personal recovery road.

Set limits. While your loved one may be unable to control certain behaviours, you need to set limits for what is and isn't acceptable in your home. If you feel that you or other family members are in danger, or that your ill loved one may be a threat to his or her own safety, **get professional help immediately.** Depending on the level of danger you perceive, this may mean calling 9-1-1 or looking at residential treatment options where your family and loved one will be safer.

Don't forget about you. If you aren't taking care of yourself, then you can't effectively care for another person. Take time out to remove yourself from the situation and do things that need to be done to keep your daily life running smoothly and to help you keep things in perspective. Spending too much time with your loved one may actually make matters worse, creating a relationship where he or she depends on you for everything. Be realistic about your relative's needs and your own so that you can both effectively cope.

Unfortunately, mental illness is a concern that is becoming more and more common amongst families everywhere. The good news is that your family and your loved one are not alone: many people go through and recover from similar challenges in their life. Stay open-minded, keep things in perspective and above all

else don't take the weight of the world on your shoulders: your own physical and emotional health depends on it.