Mental illness and relationships



Mental illnesses, such as depression, often impact an individual's thought processes and behaviour. People can experience:

Deep feelings of sadness and hopelessness.
Extreme mood swings.
Withdrawal from friends and activities.
Excessive fears or worries.
Inability to cope with daily problems and stress.
Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people.
Alcohol or substance abuse.

- Changes in sex drive.
- Excessive anger or hostility.

In severe cases, suicidal thinking or a complete detachment from reality can occur.

These feelings and behaviours have a profound effect on both the individual and on everyone around them. Friends and relatives may feel guilt, distress and/or confusion over why their loved one is behaving in certain ways. Intimate partners can also feel grief for the loss of the life and intimacy they once had and resentment at becoming a caregiver. Coworkers, neighbours and acquaintance may be bewildered or confused about how best to help.

Then there's the stigma that still surrounds mental illness that can result in embarrassment, shame and fear. As a result, many people with a mental illness find friends and colleagues withdrawing and family members reluctant to admit anything is wrong.

Types of supportive relationships

A supportive social network is important to everyone but especially to individuals and families dealing with mental illness. This network includes both formal and informal relationships.

Formal relationships include:

- Healthcare team
- Mental health agencies/practices
- Social services agencies
- Places of worship
- Workplace family and employee assistance programs

Informal relationships include:

- Family
- Intimate partners
- Friends
- Neighbours

- Work colleagues
- People who share interests (team mates, club members etc.)
- Online communities

Together, they provide instrumental, informational and emotional support – each essential in maintaining good mental health as well as recovery from a mental illness.

- **Instrumental support** involves practical help – running errands, childcare or cooking meals.

- **Informative support** provides beneficial information – a diagnosis, available community resources, etc. Contact us for a wide variety of informational support.

- **Emotional support** is having people around us who make us feel loved, valued and part of a greater community.

An extensive and supportive social network not only aids recovery and prevents relapses but helps maintain healthy relationships for everyone involved.