

Up to three quarters of the population know someone with a mental illness, yet many of us are unprepared when someone in the family develops a serious mental health problem. Feelings of confusion, anger, distress, helplessness, fear and guilt are all common and perfectly natural. There are a number of strategies families can adopt to help cope with mental illness in the family and to support a family member towards recovery.

1 Learn as much as you can about the condition.

Find out as much as you can about mental illness, treatments and support services available in your local area. Encourage the person who has experienced the illness to be involved in this process as much as possible.

2 Develop a plan

Work out a plan for coping day-by-day and for when a crisis occurs. Involve the person with the illness and discuss this with the GP, psychiatrist or other mental health professional as appropriate. Discuss strategies for when symptoms begin to recur for example. Mental illness often creates a feeling of powerlessness – developing a plan helps everyone regain a sense of control over the situation.

3 Look after yourself

Look after yourself and other family members and friends involved. When someone has a mental illness, it is common for them to become a focus of family life. Try to make time for yourself and others to relax and pursue other interests, so that you do not become worn out. This will be in everyone's interest.

Do not expect too much of yourself. You may be tired, angry or resentful at times. Your job and other personal relationships may suffer. Few people can be patient and giving all the time.

Having hope is also important. Treatments are improving and, with time, most people do achieve improved levels of recovery.

4 Contact a support group

A number of voluntary organisations e.g. AWARE, Schizophrenia Ireland and Bodywhys operate support groups for carers or relatives of people with a mental illness. Contact details for local groups are available from the agencies or by contacting Mental Health Ireland.

Coping with Mental Illness in the Family



Coping with Mental Illness in the Family is one of a series of information fact-sheets developed by Mental Health Ireland, with support from Comhairle.

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Mental Health Ireland

Coping with Mental Illness in the Family

When a family member or friend develops a mental illness, it can be distressing, worrying and isolating for everyone involved. Despite the different types and symptoms of mental illness, many family members and friends share similar experiences and it is useful to think about what you can do to help the person you care for and to look after yourself too. Outlined below are some frequently asked questions as well as strategies for coping with mental illness in the family.

Frequently Asked Questions

I am concerned about a family member but she/he won't go to the doctor. What can I do?

Don't ignore the warning signs. The sooner someone receives treatment, the better the outcome is likely to be. Yet often family members and the person themselves may be unsure if a situation warrants seeking help. Unlike physical illnesses, mental illness shows itself through behaviour. Symptoms may vary and be subtle including irritability, withdrawing from people, neglecting physical appearance, change in weight or changes in sleeping pattern. Low-level symptoms may persist for some time before becoming more serious or symptoms may suddenly disappear and then recur.

While confusion and reluctance to seek help is common, it is important to recognise when outside help is needed.

The GP is the first point of contact for help and in many instances will be able to effectively support and treat the patient presenting with mental health difficulties. It is preferable if a person is encouraged to attend their GP themselves but if this is not happening it may be useful to make an appointment yourself and discuss your concerns. In some cases the GP may decide to refer a person to the local mental health services and will usually set up an appointment with a psychiatrist. This is usually an outpatient appointment and a person may be referred to a day hospital, day centre or benefit from a visiting mental health nurse, or other community based support services.

While most people will be treated on an out-patient basis, in some instances a period in hospital is needed. In a small

minority of cases such admission is on an involuntary basis. Where this is necessary your GP will advise on the process in place.

Further information on the mental health services is available in Mental Health Ireland's leaflet 'Accessing Mental Health Services'.

How is a diagnosis made?

The most widely used system of psychiatric diagnosis is the International Classification of Diseases devised by the World Health Organisation commonly referred to as the ICD-10. This publication provides a classification of mental and behavioural disorders including clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines.

The diagnosis of mental illness is often believed to be more difficult than diagnosis of general medical disorders as there is no definitive laboratory test or, for example, abnormality in brain tissue that can identify the illness. The diagnosis of a mental disorder is informed by the patient's reports of the intensity and duration of symptoms, signs from their mental status examination and clinical observation of their behaviour.

Knowledge about diagnosis continues to evolve, reflecting greater understanding of disorders as well as changing cultural and social norms.

How is mental illness treated?

Treatment varies depending on the type of mental illness but generally includes a combination of medication, psychological or behavioural therapies. Medication is generally used in the treatment of schizophrenia, clinical depression, bi-polar disorder (manic depression) and severe anxiety states.

The vast majority of individuals receive treatment in the community from their GP and members of the community mental health team such as a Psychiatrist, Community Mental Health Nurse, Clinical Psychologist, Addiction Counsellor or Mental Health Social Worker. Treatment can take place in out-patient clinics, day hospitals and day centres while home based support teams allow the individual to be treated and supported in their own home.

Can I talk to the doctor about a family member's illness?

The principle of doctor patient confidentiality applies to persons with a mental illness just as it does to other patients. A doctor will discuss with their patient their wishes in terms of providing information to family members. In some instances a patient will request that details regarding the illness are not disclosed to family members. This can be a source of hurt and difficulty for the family members concerned but in such instances, it is important to remember that the doctor must respect the wishes of the patient.

In most instances the involvement of a family member is an important source of information in assessing a person initially, and in developing an appropriate care and treatment plan. If a patient is confused, relatives will need to be consulted. As a parent, partner, daughter or son, on hearing a diagnosis the following questions may be useful in understanding better the nature of the illness and what support you can best give to a family member. The need for information and support for family members is particularly important following a period in hospital or a first episode of illness.

- What is the diagnosis?
- What medications, if any are being described? (Further information on understanding and asking questions regarding medication is available in the MHI leaflet 'Facts you should know about the medicines you take')
- What changes in behaviour can I expect when he/she comes home?
- When can I expect to see some improvement in his/her condition?
- What support services will he/she need?
- How can I tell if he/she has a relapse?
- Who should I call if there is an emergency?
- What can I do to help him/her?