

How to Support Your 1 in 4

MHA
Mental Health America

Contact UK Work+Life Connections at (859) 218-0461. Visit us online at www.uky.edu/HR/WLC.

Supporting Someone Close to You

If you have a family member or friend who has been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, you are probably wondering what you can do to help. Although new forms of therapy, medications and community services have enabled many individuals to lead full, independent lives, support from family, friends and peers remains an essential element in the recovery process.

There are many ways you can help someone with a mental illness navigate the treatment system and work towards recovery. As in any relationship, emotional and practical support is always needed. Occasionally, family and friends participate in someone's recovery by offering transportation, financial and housing assistance. Whatever form it takes, your support, compassion and respect matter.

Knowing when and how to give support can be difficult to figure out, however. Though you may want to protect your family member or friend, remember that learning to manage one's own affairs, pursue goals and become independent are important aspects of an individual's recovery from mental illness.

Medication Issues

Many individuals with mental illness take some type of medication to help control their symptoms. For those with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, this may involve taking antipsychotic medications. Although antipsychotic treatments have improved over the past 10 years, they still can cause side effects that lead to other problems that can make your friend or family member feel even worse. As a result, they may stop taking their medication.

Individuals with serious mental illness may not feel comfortable discussing their symptoms, feelings or medication side effects with family members and friends. However, a key element in recovery is productive, two-way communication between patient and doctor – what Mental Health America calls a Dialogue for Recovery. A Dialogue for Recovery that is based on mutual respect with a team of health care professionals can make a big difference in helping your family member or friend to recover.

do more for

1 in 4

Support Strategies

Here are some tips for supporting someone close to you:

- Educate yourself about the diagnosis, illness symptoms and side effects from anti-psychotic treatments and other medications. Local Mental Health America affiliates, public libraries and the Internet are good resources to learn about mental illnesses and treatment options.
- Recognize that your family member or friend may be scared and confused after receiving a diagnosis. Though some people are relieved to receive a diagnosis and actively seek treatment, it may feel devastating to others and bring on stressful feelings.
- Listen carefully to your family member or friend and express your understanding back to him or her. Recognize the feelings he or she is experiencing and don't discount them, even if you believe them to be symptoms of the illness.
- Encourage your family member or friend to become an active member with his or her treatment team to gain knowledge about what treatments and services will help in his or her recovery.
- Recognize that it may take time for your family member or friend to find the proper medications and dosages that work.
- Understand that recovery from mental illness isn't simply a matter of "just staying on one's medications." Self-esteem, social support and a feeling of contributing to society are also essential elements in the recovery process.
- Encourage your family member or friend to speak immediately to his or her health-care provider about any problems related to medications. Your support in encouraging an ongoing Dialogue for Recovery can benefit your loved one's recovery.
- Obtain the Antipsychotic Side Effects Checklist (ASC) and help your family member or friend fill it out. Only do so, however, if they have indicated that your help is desired. Encourage them to bring it to the next doctor's appointment. A copy of the checklist is available in the Dialogue for Recovery section of MHA's Web site.
- Offer to accompany your family member or friend to medical and other appointments and, if he or she wants you to, discuss medication and side effects with the doctor and the treatment team of social workers, counselors, nurses or other professionals.
- Always respect the individual's need for and right to privacy. A person with a mental illness has the same right to be treated with dignity and respect as any other person.

For more information and useful tips, check out the "Mental Illness and the Family" series at www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/supporting-family-and-friends.

Mental Health America
2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 684-7722
www.mentalhealthamerica.net