



Promoting Consumer Community Integration and Supporting Recovery for Family Members and Supporters

Family members and other supporters of people with mental illnesses (referred to here as consumers of mental health services) can play a key role in their treatment and recovery, including helping the consumer find services (if the consumer wants services), promoting self-determination (the right to have power over one's own life), providing encouragement and fostering hope.

Watching someone you care about cope with mental illness can be difficult and painful. As is true for all caregivers, it is crucial that you take care of yourself, respect your limits and find the support and respite you need in order to avoid irritability or burnout. Besides jeopardizing your own health, these potential consequences may adversely affect the consumer: Studies show that people with certain disorders, such as schizophrenia, who are around individuals who are volatile, critical or chaotic have a more difficult time recovering and return to the hospital more often. Through good self-care, you are more likely to be supportive, patient and non-critical because you will feel better yourself.

Supporting the consumer requires four crucial steps:

- 1) helping the consumer find information and resources, if they so desire;*
- 2) listening uncritically to the consumer's interests and wishes;*
- 3) encouraging the consumer's interests and wishes;*
- 4) knowing when to be available but not intrusive, if the consumer is not interested in your help.*

Any actions you can take to help the consumer become more independent will alleviate some of the demands of caregiving. Also, supporting the consumer in such areas as employment, education, religion, housing and transportation will help eliminate the barriers to living successfully in the community.

Below are some tips for family members and other supporters in helping adult children, parents, siblings or others who have serious mental illnesses:

1. Promote natural supports:

Research indicates that a strong social support network is key to the recovery of people with mental illnesses. Involvement in community activities or in a religious community also promotes recovery by giving the consumer a sense of purpose and fostering spiritual growth. Provide information about involvement in:

- self-help groups;
- community activities, such as neighborhood associations, political organizations, and volunteering at hospitals, schools, and other non-profit organizations;
- religious organizations; and
- social groups.

2. Promote education & employment opportunities:

Positive experiences with education and employment offer many short-and long-term rewards — including goals and a sense of purpose — that promote self-determination and recovery.

3. Support wellness planning:

· Be available to discuss with the consumer his or her coping plans for daily decisions and interactions within the family and community.

· Be available to discuss with the consumer and his or her mental health professionals effective strategies for handling suicidal or aggressive behavior. If the consumer is not open to this discussion or if there are no professionals involved, you can learn skills for coping with these situations through workshops and support groups offered through local affiliates of NAMI (formerly the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) or the National Mental Health Association.

If the consumer is interested, be available to help him or her create a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) that includes a Child Care Plan and an Advance Directive. A WRAP is a set of steps he or she can take to maintain good mental health and avoid triggering episodes of mental illness. An advance directive instructs providers about the consumer's treatment preferences in the event that his or her decision-making abilities are impaired. If the consumer has children, he or she should decide ahead of time what





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will happen to the children if their parent becomes incapacitated or hospitalized. This may prevent custody loss.

4. *Maintain positive communication:*

If the consumer is agitated or upset, be available and supportive. Follow day-to-day coping plans that have been previously agreed upon. Make note of the consumer's progress. Family members: Be available to discuss the mental illness in your family if the consumer wants to talk about it.

5. *Promote physical health:*

Encourage the consumer to take care of his or her physical health by exercising and practicing good nutrition.

6. *Promote self-determination:*

Consumers should be making their own choices in the areas of treatment, education, employment, religion, and social relationships, whether or not you agree with those choices.

7. *Encourage the consumer to get treatment and to be an active participant in treatment:*

Encourage the consumer to advocate for him/herself about treatment preferences.

8. *Get information for yourself:*

Understanding how the consumer feels will help you to provide greater support. Learn what you can do to foster his or her recovery. And keep in mind that no one — neither the consumer nor his or her family — is to blame for causing a mental illness.

9. *Provide and seek out emotional support:*

Practice good health habits and seek out emotional support for yourself when necessary. Explore opportunities to participate in support groups or education and training courses for caregivers in your area. Also, accept the consumer's disorder. Your inability to at least acknowledge it may impede the consumer's ability to accept it as well, and you will be more likely to respond to the consumer with anger rather than compassion.

10. *Maintain a positive outlook:*

Have hope. Identify the consumer's strengths and make it clear that he or she is appreciated. Convey your confidence about the consumer's recovery through your words and actions. If you are feeling discouraged or hopeless, talk to someone who understands these feelings but believes that, with support, people with mental illnesses can and do recover and are able to lead satisfying and meaningful lives.

Resources

Better Health Channel Fact Sheet: "Mental Illness—Family and Friends." [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/\(Pages\)/Mental_illness_family_and_friends?OpenDocument](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/(Pages)/Mental_illness_family_and_friends?OpenDocument)

"Coping Tips for Siblings and Adult Children of Persons with Mental Illness," www.healthyplace.com/communities/bipolar/related/support_021.asp

Coping Tips for Spouses and Partners, www.lightship.org

"Coping Tips for Youth Growing Up with Mental Illness in the Family," www.mhasp.org/coping

"Coping with Mental Illness: Tips for Families and Consumers," <http://md.nami.org/coping.htm>

"Family Support: A Key Component of Reintegration." Reintegration Today, Spring 2005, p.17-18.

"How Family Members Can Help People with Health Disorders," www.healthinmind.com/english/familieshelp.htm

"In Times of Disaster: Coping Tips for Families of Persons with Mental Illness," www.rfmh.org/nki/News&Emp/content.cfm?newsid=60

"Schizophrenia: A Handbook for Families--Support for the Family," www.mentalhealth.com/book/p40-sc01.html

