

Mental Illness & the Family: Recognizing the Warning Signs and How to Cope

Most people believe that mental disorders are rare and “happen to someone else.” In fact, mental disorders are common and widespread. An estimated 54 million Americans suffer from some form of mental disorder in a given year. Most families are not prepared to cope with learning their loved one has a mental illness. It can be physically and emotionally trying, and can make us feel vulnerable to the opinions and judgments of others. If you think you or someone you know may have a mental or emotional problem, it is important to remember there is hope and help.

What is mental illness?

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life’s ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal.

Mental health problems may be related to excessive stress due to a particular situation or series of events. As with cancer, diabetes and heart disease, mental illnesses are often physical as well as emotional and psychological. Mental illnesses may be caused by a reaction to environmental stresses, genetic factors, biochemical imbalances, or a combination of these. With proper care and treatment many individuals learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional disorder.

Warning Signs and Symptoms

It is especially important to pay attention to sudden changes in thoughts and behaviors. Also keep in mind that the onset of several of the symptoms below, and not just any one change, indicates a problem that should be assessed. The symptoms below should not be due to recent substance use or another medical condition. If you or someone you know is in crisis now, seek help immediately. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24 hour crisis center or dial 911 for immediate assistance.

In Adults, Young Adults and Adolescents:

- Confused thinking
- Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
- Feelings of extreme highs and lows
- Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- Social withdrawal
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Strong feelings of anger
- Strange thoughts (delusions)
- Seeing or hearing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- Suicidal thoughts
- Numerous unexplained physical ailments
- Substance abuse

In Older Children and Pre-Adolescents:

- Substance abuse
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments



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- Changes in ability to manage responsibilities - at home and/or at school
- Defiance of authority, truancy, theft, and/or vandalism

- Intense fear
- Prolonged negative mood, often accompanied by poor appetite or thoughts of death
- Frequent outbursts of anger

In Younger Children:

- Changes in school performance
- Poor grades despite strong efforts
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Excessive worry or anxiety (i.e. refusing to go to bed or school)
- Hyperactivity
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression
- Frequent temper tantrums

How to Cope Day-to-Day

Accept your feelings: Despite the different symptoms and types of mental illnesses, many families who have a loved one with mental illness, share similar experiences. You may find yourself denying the warning signs, worrying what other people will think because of the stigma, or wondering what caused your loved one to become ill. Accept that these feelings are normal and common among families going through similar situations. Find out all you can about your loved one's illness by reading and talking with mental health professionals. Share what you have learned with others.

Handling unusual behavior: The outward signs of a mental illness are often behavioral. A person may be extremely quiet or withdrawn. Conversely, he or she may burst into tears, have great anxiety or have outbursts of anger. Even after treatment has started, some individuals with a mental illness can exhibit anti-social behaviors. When in public, these behaviors can be disruptive and difficult to accept. The next time you and your family member visit your doctor or mental health professional, discuss these behaviors and develop a strategy for coping. Ask questions, listen with an open mind and be there to support them.

Establishing a support network: Whenever possible, seek support from friends and family members. If you feel you cannot discuss your situation with friends or other family members, find a self-help or support group. These groups provide an opportunity for you to talk to other people who are experiencing the same type of problems. They can listen and offer valuable advice.

Seeking counseling: Therapy can be beneficial for both the individual with mental illness and other family members. A mental health professional can suggest ways to cope and better understand your loved one's illness. When looking for a therapist, be patient and talk to a few professionals so you can choose the person that is right for you and your family. It may take time until you are comfortable, but in the long run you will be glad you sought help.

Taking time out: It is common for the person with the mental illness to become the focus of family life. When this happens, other members of the family may feel ignored or resentful. Some may find it difficult to pursue their own interests. If you are the caregiver, you need some time for yourself. Schedule time away to prevent becoming frustrated or angry. If you schedule time for yourself it will help you to keep things in perspective and you may have more patience and compassion for coping or helping your loved one. Being physically and emotionally healthy helps you to help others.

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