



Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Six ways you can help someone affected with a mental illness



When someone you love is diagnosed with a mental illness, it can be very confusing and frightening. If you do not have a lot of experience with mental illness, it might be difficult to know where to begin to help them, as much as you are certain you want to offer support. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are common first reactions to these diagnoses, but they need not be permanent states: there are many ways you can help your affected family member or friend. Below you will find six ways you can offer help and show support.

1. Educate yourself

This is a crucial first step in being able to offer any kind of help or support – the more you know about your loved one's particular condition, the more you will be empowered to offer meaningful help. This means devoting some time to research: all mental illnesses have advocacy and treatment organizations with websites that offer reliable information. Check out books from the local library, these can be informative books on the condition itself, or memoirs chronicling first-hand experience.

2. Take a role in their treatment

Seeking treatment for mental illness can be lonely, scary, and sometimes difficult to comply with. Support helps: offer to go along to doctor's appointments; help the person keep a log of symptoms and how they respond to different treatments; and talk to their healthcare professionals about how else you might be able to aid in their care plan.

3. Talk about it

Mental illness is so often shrouded in silence, bringing it out into the open can make a huge difference in lessening your loved one's stress. It doesn't need to be a big deal, but feelings of shame and stigma can be greatly reduced by simply letting the person affected know that you are there and open to talking about their illness, feelings, and understanding how you can best help them.

4. Normalize and do something else

As much as it is important to be frank and open about the mental illness, it can be exhausting if it feels like it's the only focus. Do activities that remind you and your loved one that mental illness isn't the centre of your universe – let them take the lead on this and ask them to come up with something they'd like to do.

5. Help yourself

Self-care is essential if you want to really be of help to someone else. The stress of living with someone with a mental illness can be significant, and is not to be underestimated. It is expected and normal that you may be affected emotionally by your loved one's illness. You may find it helpful to talk to a counsellor of your own, or find a support group particularly intended for loved ones of people experiencing mental illness.

6. Express love and support

Tell them how much you appreciate them, how brave they are, and how proud you are. Remind them that you're here for support, if needed. Let them know that it is okay to take the time to get well.

Above all, if you ever feel unsure of how to help or if you are helping, ask your loved one. Everyone experiences mental illness differently, so no one is a greater expert on their particular condition than they are.

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