

THE IMPACT OF MENTAL ILLNESS ON FAMILIES

local expert



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Coping with a loved one's illness can be stressful to family members

BY MICHELLE KELLEY, LCSW

Mental health problems affect an entire family, not just the individual. Loving and caring for someone with mental health issues can be heartbreaking and exhausting. Frustration and resentment are often experienced alongside compassion, hope, and worry. When you notice that a loved one is struggling, it may feel imperative to get him or her to recognize the issues and get the help they need. Unfortunately, it's common for struggling individuals to deny there is a problem or refuse help, despite your desperate pleas. Mental health problems are stressful for everyone, even when well-managed.

Depression, anxiety, ADD/ADHD, and addiction are some of the more common mental health problems. Sometimes an individual struggling is the first to identify their problem. However, it is more likely that a loved one will be the first to discern the signs of mental health deterioration.

If you are worried about what's happening to a loved one, you may wonder when the best time to vocalize your worries is. If you mention your concerns too soon, he or she may pull away. If you wait too long, he or she will likely suffer more consequences from the illness and you may speak out of frustration rather than compassion. Often, people suffering from mental illness are in denial. As a result, it's more effective to discuss how their state of mind hurts you rather than how it hurts them.

TREATMENT AND HELP FOR THOSE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Treatment options for mental health issues include lifestyle changes

(diet and exercise), counseling, medication, mindfulness and meditation techniques, and sometimes hospitalization. However, not all those suffering will readily comply with treatment, and, unless there is an emergency situation, do not have to. Shannon Raybuck, LPC, mental health care coordinator at the Fauquier Free Clinic, says, "The most difficult thing when families approach me for help is helping them understand the limitations in getting support for adults in need when there is no imminent safety concern. Families often feel overwhelmed trying to understand the mental health system and shortage of providers."

SUPPORT FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Another thing Raybuck always addresses with concerned family members is how to manage their own feelings and establish boundaries if the individual

does not choose to accept help. She says, "This situation is very distressing for the family, and they can feel hopeless, experience stress, trauma responses, anxiety, and depression themselves. I encourage the family members to seek counseling for themselves to cope with the stress of caring for their loved one, and I also refer them to family support meetings in the community."

WHAT CAN THE COMMUNITY DO TO HELP? ELIMINATING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL HEALTH.

Mental health difficulties are often misunderstood and have a lingering negative stigma. Many still view mental illness as a sign of weakness, believing someone should just be able to "get over it." Shame often keeps individuals and families from discussing their mental health struggles. Demystifying mental health issues starts with education and sharing personal stories and authentic conversations. Education is the door to

empowering families in dealing with mental health issues. Support combined with education leads to compassion, talking openly about mental health, empowerment and change.

Raybuck adds, "I think as a community we can do better supporting the family members through support groups and acknowledging the impact of having a family member struggle with mental illness. We also need to focus on the individual in front of us, the family members, and not just offer resources for the individual in need."

Millions of Americans face the reality of living with a mental health disorder. From family to friends to colleagues, mental health struggles affect everyone directly or indirectly. As a society, we need to work together to remove the stigma so more will seek help. Let's try and be more empathetic, understanding, and compassionate. ❖

SOME COMMON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

DEPRESSION: Depression is an umbrella term for a wide range of symptoms including depressed mood, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, sleep variations, lack of concentration, and thoughts of suicide. A person is considered clinically depressed when he or she can no longer function well in their day-to-day activities. Many do not seek help for their depression because they do not realize they have it or they think they will snap out of it. This is why it is so important for family members or loved ones to be able to recognize warning signs, they are often the first ones to notice a change in behavior.

ANXIETY: Anxiety is a normal part of life. However, those with anxiety disorders experience intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. Symptoms can range from mild to debilitating. Types of anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), social anxiety, panic disorder, and specific phobias. Those struggling with anxiety are more likely to seek professional help. This may be due to anxiety being less socially stigmatized.

ADHD: Attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder is a common disorder which impacts focus, self-control and use of working memory. It's caused by differences in brain anatomy and wiring. Often, it's genetic. Everyone has symptoms of ADHD at some time or another, but to be diagnosed with ADHD, someone must have far more difficulties with these problems than their peers.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE: Drug addiction affects a person's brain and behavior. Common drug addictions include but are not limited to alcohol, marijuana, prescription medications, and opioids. Possible signs that a loved one is abusing a substance include problems at work or school, neglected appearance, changes in behavior, physical health issues (lack of energy and motivation, weight gain or loss). When an addict refuses to get help, family and friends should seek support for their personal mental health. Both loved ones and addicts suffer with feelings of shame, denial and isolation.