

HOW TO HELP A LOVED ONE THROUGH A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS



First and foremost, if someone you love has been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, it is ok to be uncertain, but remember it is a disease like any other disease and they will need your compassion and support. Although there are an array of new forms of therapy, medications and community support services, support from family and friends and peers is an essential element for a long-term positive treatment outcome.

We know the process can be confusing and uncertain! Crisis episodes related to mental illness can feel overwhelming for both the individual. It is not uncommon to ask “why me,” “why is this happening,” “what did I do” or “what can I do.” It is easy to feel hopeless. Staying positive is important.

Try to remind your loved one of these examples of positive reinforcement (they help us too):

- You are not alone
- This is not your fault
- You deserve help and support
- There is support available for you

If your loved one is going through a mental health crisis, please follow these steps. Although this guide is just a general tool, it will help keep you focused during a crisis.

1. Obtain a complete psychiatric evaluation.
2. There are more references to HIPPA below, but have your loved one sign a release of medical information. Then request to attend a treatment team meeting.
3. Once you have a diagnosis, try to understand what the diagnosis means (some of these are discussed more below):
 - a. What is the general course of the illness and its long-term prognosis?
 - b. What is the specific treatment plan?
 - c. What symptoms cause the most concern and should be monitored?
 - d. What medications are being prescribed, why these medications, dosage and expected response and side effects?
 - e. What is the reasoning for the medication?
 - f. How often can the family meet with the treatment team to discuss progress of concerns?
 - g. Who is a point of contact if there are issues in between meetings?
4. Determine if there is a co-occurring substance use issue. This is important to understand so that any therapy and treatment options include recovery treatment.
 - a. Substance abuse issues can be marijuana, alcohol or prescription drugs. It does not solely have to be street drugs. Substance use is common for those struggling with a mental illness.

5. At a treatment team meeting, describe any factors you think contributed to the crisis, stressors, or any other information that could be helpful for effective treatment. This includes the individual's past unwillingness to adhere to a plan. It's crucial the doctor knows potential setbacks that may occur. Also discuss the most appropriate living situation, even if living with you is not an option.
6. Ask the treating doctor for recommendations as to the TYPE of therapy, based on the treatment:
 - a. In-patient
 - b. Intensive out-patient
 - c. Weekly therapy
 - d. Peer-to-peer options
7. Medication is often prescribed to help control the symptoms of mental illness just like any other disease. Be sure to ask about potential side effects that could lead to other problems so that you are aware of things to look for in your loved one. Sometimes these side effects can lead an individual to stop taking their medication, so ask about signs of that happening.
8. Find a doctor who is willing to include the support system of the patient in some way. *Inclusive, productive conversations about symptoms, medications and issues is a key element in recovery.*
9. Remember that your loved one may be scared, confused and even resistant towards a diagnosis. Try to remind them that it is a disease and if they had cancer or diabetes, they (and you) would do everything you could to lead to a positive, long-term treatment option.
10. Recognize that it may take time to find proper medication and therapies that work for your loved one. Sometimes it can feel more art than science and every individual is different. That's ok.
11. Understand that medication alone is not enough to sustain a long-term outcome. Self-esteem, social support and feeling good about oneself (having a job, going to school) are essential elements. Sometimes this takes time, so remember that helping a loved one through a mental health crisis is a marathon.
12. Walking this can be difficult. Give yourself some grace to figure it out.

PLEASE REMEMBER: while support is critical, this is a personal illness and there are some elements of privacy. Conversations with therapists should be private.

How to choose a medical provider

When choosing a medical provider, please ask them these questions:

1. How do you feel about confidentiality or involving the family from a support system? (You don't need the confidence of what was discussed, but information on what to look for, how to help, and changes to help reinforce positive steps for the patient is important.)
 - a. Don't let anyone tell you they are an adult or that HIPAA prevents sharing. The patient can sign a form that permits sharing and can even designate what information can be shared.
2. What are your thoughts on different types of therapy or other activities to support mental wellness, such as yoga, meditation, peer to peer, etc.?
3. Have you worked more with children, adults or families? What is your preferred specialty?
4. Would you be open to including the family in certain sessions?
5. Do you help to provide coping methods to a patient that is concerned about medication?

If your loved one has been hospitalized, make sure you have a detailed discharge plan.

A discharge plan includes ways you can help care for and support your loved one. They aren't always shared with the family, so ask for it. When loved ones have surgery or are admitted to a hospital for other illnesses, these plans are easily shared. **Any discharge plan should include:**

1. Reason for admission
2. Information on diagnosis in terms that are easy to understand.
3. Medications to take after discharge, including the purpose of each medication and possible side effects, refills and how to take them.
4. Self-care activities that include diet and exercise, as well as limits on physical activities.
5. Coping skills that could include meditation, mindfulness or yoga.
6. Recovery goals, plans for work
7. Crisis management - what to do if a crisis occurs, who to contact in an emergency and details of warning signs to avert a crisis.
8. Follow up appointments
9. Referrals to services. If recommendations are not provided, go to hearts4minds.org for a resource list.

Everyone deserves effective and compassionate care for their mental health. We know it can be difficult to find appropriate services or know where to start. Being an advocate for your loved one is a critical role in the recovery process. It is ok to get frustrated but try to remain organized (get a small notebook dedicated to your loved one or a calendar), try to focus on one task at a time, stay calm (your loved one is relying on you to be the voice of reason), and get support for yourself (from friends, family or group therapy).

Taking care of yourself should also be a priority. Think of it this way, if you are using your pitcher of water to fill up everyone's glasses, at some point you'll need someone to fill up your pitcher.

For more information on local treatment centers go to www.Hearts4Minds.org
or contact us at info@hearts4minds.org.

