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Mental Illness in the Family **Recognizing the Warning Signs & Learning How to Cope**

Most people believe that mental disorders are rare and “happen to someone else.” In fact, mental disorders are common and widespread. They can strike **anyone** at any point in their life. An estimated 51 million Americans suffer from some form of mental disorder in a given year.

Sharing a home with someone who has a mental illness may be difficult and stressful. Most families are not prepared to cope with this situation. 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 that there is hope and help is available.

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. 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 stress, 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. For others, it may be a lifelong challenge. 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. Despite the different symptoms and types of mental illness, many families & caregivers share similar experiences.

Do you find yourself:

Denying the warning signs?

Substance abuse, “growing pains” or menopause, for example, may mask signs of mental illness. Individuals abusing drugs may be seeking ways to cope with their mental illness. Repeated visits to a doctor with complaints of flu-like symptoms, back pain or colds may also be symptomatic of an underlying mental illness.

Worrying about what other people think?

Often the warning signs of mental illness are ignored because of the stigma that persists. Some people may face ridicule or hostility from friends and neighbors. The insensitivity of others may add to feelings of loneliness and isolation which prevent a family from seeking help.

Wondering who's to blame?

Often, knowing what causes an illness helps people to accept the situation and move on to seeking treatment. With some mental illnesses, there are no immediate answers or obvious reasons why someone became ill. Today, research tells us that many mental illnesses are caused by a variety of reasons. Find out all you can about your loved one's illness by reading and talking with mental health professionals.

How to cope day-to-day

Handling unusual behavior

The outward signs of a mental illness are often behavioral. Individuals may be extremely quiet or withdrawn. Conversely, he or she may burst into tears or have outbursts of anger. Even after treatment has started, individuals with a mental illness can exhibit anti-social behaviors. When in public, these behaviors can be embarrassing and difficult to accept. Try to be patient and remember that the person probably cannot control his or her actions. Calmly move to a private location until the episode is over. The next time you and your family member visit your doctor, discuss these behaviors and develop a strategy for coping.

Establishing a support network

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

It is likely that the family member with the mental illness is seeing a therapist or counselor. Therapy can also be beneficial for family members. The therapist can suggest ways to cope and better understand your loved one's illness. When looking for a therapist, be patient and talk with a few different people so you can choose the therapist that is right for you and your family. It may take time until you are comfortable with the therapist, 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, annoyed and resentful. Some may find it difficult to pursue their own interests. If you are a care giver, you may need some time to rest. Schedule time away before you become 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.

You have feelings, too

Remember, the responsibility of caring for a person 24 hours a day can be exhausting and unpredictable, even frightening. Take time for yourself; seek respite care and the support and help of family and friends. Only when you are physically and emotionally healthy can you help others. It is not always possible to be patient and giving. There are times when you may be tired, angry or resentful. Accept these feelings and go easy on yourself.

Inpatient care

There are many reasons why it may be necessary to hospitalize the family member who has a mental illness. Medications may need to be adjusted under close supervision, or a different course of treatment may be necessary. At these times, it is not only the individual with the illness who must make changes, but also the family. Take time to re-focus, develop a new routine and plan for your loved one's return.

Don't give up too soon

Recovery from a mental illness takes time, months or even years. Don't be discouraged by temporary setbacks and try not to blame yourself when things go wrong.

Warning signs of mental illness:

In Adults

confused thinking, prolonged depression (sadness or irritability), extreme highs and lows, excessive fears, worries and anxiety, social withdrawal, dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits, strong feelings of anger, delusions or hallucinations, growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities, suicidal thoughts, denial of obvious problems, numerous unexplained physical ailments, substance abuse

In Older Children & Pre-Adolescents

substance abuse, inability to cope with problems and daily activities, changes in sleeping and / or eating habits, excessive complaints of physical ailments, defiance of authority, truancy, theft and / or vandalism, intense fear of weight gain, 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, excessive worry or anxiety (for example refusing to go to bed or school), hyperactivity, persistent nightmares, persistent disobedience or aggression, frequent temper tantrums