



## **Tips for People Living with Mental Illness In Uncertain Times**

With ongoing military action in Iraq and the continuing terrorist threat here at home, Americans are experiencing many powerful emotions. For most people, the intense feelings of anxiety, sadness, grief and anger are healthy and appropriate. But some people may have more profound and debilitating reactions to the war. This could be especially true for those who live with serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, substance abuse problems, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

It is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to trauma and each person has his or her own tolerance level for difficult feelings. When confronted with a crisis, a person with a mental illness may experience the symptoms of his or her disorder or see new ones emerge.

Some consumers who have experienced this say that there are warning signs. Here are some common warning signs of an oncoming relapse:

- Stopping your usual routines, such as attending school or joining family activities
- Changing your sleeping pattern or eating habits, not caring about your appearance, difficulties with your coordination, lapses in short-term memory
- Experiencing mood swings, feeling out of control or very agitated, thinking about suicide or violence
- Doing things that make others think you're out of touch with reality
- Hearing or seeing things that other do not
- Being unable to let go of an idea, thought or phrase. Having trouble thinking or speaking clearly
- Deciding not to take your medications or to follow through with your treatment plan (missing appointments, etc.)
- Feeling unable to enjoy things that are usually pleasurable " Being unable to make even routine decisions

Different people can have different warning signs, so be aware of anything that seems out of the ordinary for you. If people around you notice changes, listen to what they say. You could be totally unaware of changes in your behavior. Be sure to report any changes, especially any talk or thoughts of suicide or self-inflicted injury, to your doctor or treatment team.

Even in uncertain times such as these, you must take an active role in managing your illness. Continue to follow the treatment plan you've developed with your doctor or treatment team.

- Take your medications just as your doctor prescribed
- Keep your therapy appointments
- Avoid alcohol use
- Do not use illicit drugs or any that are not prescribed specifically for you
- Keep a journal or diary
- Have prescribed laboratory and psychological tests
- Stay connected with or get involved in a support group
- Report any signs of a relapse to your treatment team

To get through the current crisis, take advantage of the people and tools that are available to you:

- Involve family and friends. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Keep your doctor and treatment team informed about how the war is affecting you.
- Make contact with self-help groups and support organizations that help people with serious mental illnesses and related problems.
- Access peer support and other programs, ranging from drop-in centers to housing, employment and recreational opportunities that can help you better manage your illness.
- Learn all you can about your illness and what you have to do to move to recovery.
- Use the computer to get information about your illness and to contact and exchange views and experiences with others who share your experiences.
- Stay in touch with your spirituality, if you find that comforting. Be optimistic about the challenges that lie ahead.

Find what works for you. The process of moving toward recovery, especially in times of war or crisis, is not a simple one. Stay fully involved in the process by following your treatment plan and seeking the support you need, when you need it.

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