



COPING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY

Having someone in the family with a chronic physical illness can be hard to cope with - but it can be even worse for families living with a relative who is, not physically, but mentally ill. Although mental illness is so common that it affects one in four people in Australia from all cultural backgrounds, it's still misunderstood.

One fear for instance, is that people who are mentally ill are violent - yet most people with a mental illness aren't violent. Then there's the idea that if someone has recovered from a mental illness like a "nervous breakdown", they are still mentally "weak" in some way - yet people with a mental illness can have a full recovery just the same as anyone can recover completely from a physical illness. Another problem is that a lot of people feel very uneasy or embarrassed if a mentally ill person behaves in an unusual or different way.

Attitudes like these make life hard for families living with a mentally ill relative. Some families feel they have to hide their relative's illness from the rest of the world. Or they may feel isolated, either because it's difficult to invite people home, or because they may be shunned by other people - including other members of their family who avoid visiting them.

It's important that families in this situation don't try to cope with the problem alone. Like any illness, mental illness can be treated more easily if it's detected early. Sometimes families ignore the symptoms of mental illness, hoping things will get better. But the chances are things will get worse and the person may need to be hospitalised when they could have been treated at home if they'd been diagnosed earlier.

The same goes for families living with a relative who has been diagnosed with an illness such as schizophrenia or manic depression, for instance. If they begin to behave strangely or refuse to take medication that helps control their illness, it can be tempting to hope the problem will pass. But this can make things worse. It's much better to contact the doctor treating the person, or the mental health team at the nearest hospital or community health centre to get professional help. This makes it easier to control the illness and keep the person stable.

If someone in your family is mentally ill, try to learn as much about the illness as possible. This helps you know what to expect and how to cope with it - mental health workers can give you advice on how to cope with and communicate with someone who is having delusions or hallucinations, for example, or someone who is depressed or threatening suicide.

Being informed can also stop you blaming yourself - many families feel they may have somehow caused their relative's illness, but this isn't true. Many factors can combine to cause mental illness. There may be an inherited disposition, a chemical imbalance in the brain, there may be life stresses like unemployment, retirement, breakdown or even migration. But no one is to blame for the illness - neither the patient nor the family.

If someone in the family is mentally ill there are places which can help. These include community health centres, as well as the Transcultural Mental Health Centre (QTMHC) which can give advice and referral to mental health professionals or support groups.

The Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (ARAFMI) is an organisation which helps friends and relatives by offering advice, information and support. ARAFMI can be contacted on (07) 3254 1881.

Other support services which can be contacted are:

- The QTMHC Secondary Clinic Support Service on (07) 3240 2833;
- The Ethnic Mental Health Program for Croatian, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Spanish and Vietnamese speakers on (07) 3891 7911;
- NESB Mental Health Worker, Townsville Migrant Resource Centre on (077) 724 800;
- Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivor of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT) on (07) 3391 6677
- Translating & Interpreting Service on 131 450.

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