

# How to support a friend or family member with mental illness

Being diagnosed with a mental illness can be a shock—both for the person diagnosed and for his or her family and friends. On the other hand, finally obtaining a diagnosis and treatment plan can sometimes help relieve stress in the family and start moving recovery forward. Family members can be an invaluable resource for individuals dealing with mental illnesses. Helping others and providing support can make a difference for someone who is going through a tough time.

## Offer emotional support

When a friend, family member or someone you care about is going through a tough time, you may find it difficult to understand how to help. However, for most people, just asking if they are okay and offering to be available can make a difference. It's often a big relief for them to know that you're aware that they are going through a tough time and you're willing to listen and be there to help if needed. Express your concern and sympathy, talk openly and make sure that your friend knows that he/she is not alone.

## Have an open conversation

Find an opportunity during everyday life activities to start the conversation and ask them how they are really feeling. Ask open questions such as, "What's happening in your life at the moment?" If you just get back "fine," ask them how they're really feeling. Talk gently about your concerns and the things you have noticed. Give them time and space to tell you about what they are going through. A simple pause may be enough for them to feel comfortable to talk. Listen carefully to their responses without interrupting, being judgmental or offering solutions.

## Use sensitive language

Be deliberate in the choices of language you use when talking with someone who needs support. Avoid stigmatizing words and phrases like "crazy" or "insane" even if the other person uses them first. Share your thoughts and opinions about what the other person is saying, without giving advice or telling them what to do. Instead, try to respond emotionally, with understanding and compassion. If something they've said resonates with your own experience, share it if you feel comfortable doing so. Sometimes sharing a piece of your own journey is the best way to show you understand someone else's.

## Encourage the person to seek help

While symptoms of serious mental illnesses vary, the following signs are among the more common including: social withdrawal, difficulty functioning at school or work, feeling disconnected from reality, changes in sleeping, eating and hygiene, and alcohol or drug abuse. If you're concerned a friend or family member is exhibiting these signs, try to stay calm. It's easy to imagine the worst-case scenario, but signs of mental illness often overlap with other problems. Consider whether there are other circumstances that might be affecting the person's mood or behavior.

Encourage your loved one to talk to a trusted health care provider. If he or she is hesitant to see a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, suggest a visit to a general physician. Offer to accompany them to the appointment if they'd like. If you feel your loved one is in danger of harming himself or herself, or harming someone else, that's an emergency. Don't hesitate to call 911. If possible, ask for an officer trained in crisis intervention—many communities have officers on staff who are trained to defuse a mental health crisis in the best possible way.

**Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)**

*Sources: American Psychological Association, MentalHealth.gov, NAMI*

*This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.*

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