

Being an Effective Caregiver

If you are a caregiver of someone with a mental illness, it is normal to feel unprepared or confused about how to help them. Feelings of inadequacy are common but remember, you are not alone and there is always professional help available.

Here are 5 tips for being an effective caregiver.

1. Get Educated

A good place to start is to become educated about mental health. Learn about mental health in general, your loved one's situation, and what to do in case of an emergency.

If your loved one has received a mental health diagnosis, look up information on that particular illness from reliable sources. Your loved one is the one living through it, you can learn more by asking open ended questions such as:

- "How does it feel?"
- "What makes it worse?"
- "Is there anything I do that makes it worse, if so what?"
- "When do you feel good?"
- "What things help you to feel better?"

As you become more knowledgeable about mental health in general, and specifically your loved one's mental health condition, you will be better prepared to help.

If your loved one is taking medication, learn common side effects of the medicine. This will help you realize physical changes or changes in behavior that are normal outcomes of the medicine, and others which may be red flags. If you notice any side effects that are potentially dangerous for the patient (stroke or seizure symptoms, extreme diarrhea or dark stool, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, etc.), encourage the patient to discuss them with a medical professional to see if the medicine needs to be changed.

To prepare for an emergency, make sure you know who to contact. If there is a life threatening situation, immediately call 911. Also be sure to save the Suicide Prevention Hotline in your phone. 1 (800) 273-8255. In addition, check if there are nearby crisis centers, if your loved one's therapist or doctor has a crisis number, where the closest emergency room is, and other available resources.

It is also important to learn what type of care your loved one would like. A thorough way of ensuring a patient's desires are met is by completing a Psychiatric Advance Directive. This is a form filled out when they are feeling stable and it discusses what treatment they would/would not like to receive in a crisis.

2. Encourage Treatment

Recovery from a mental illness is possible. Sixty to eighty percent of those who receive treatment go into recovery¹. Help is available and your loved one does not need to suffer. Treatment comes in many forms. As you discuss different options with your family member or friend, they will be able to decide what is best for them. Suggest completing a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP). This is a comprehensive self-guided form that allows the individual with a mental illness to make goals towards recovery and to prevent a mental health crisis.

3. Give Freedom

This tip can be scary for you as the caregiver and potentially for the individual you are helping. That being said, it is crucial and will help your loved one recover more effectively. It will help them become resilient for future set-backs. Giving a person the freedom to choose what treatment they receive, what they eat, where they live, who they associate with, their work status, and to make decisions regarding their education is considered self-determination. When individuals take control of their lives, even in small ways, it improves their outlook on life and mental health.

Self-determination is best fostered in the family and among caregivers. Together with your family member or friend, evaluate what decisions your loved one currently makes and discuss things that are being done for them which can be done on their own. For some people, choosing where they live and whom they live with may help them feel confident, empowered and strengthen recovery. For others, those decisions may be overwhelming and increase anxiety. If this is the case, brainstorm other areas where they can practice self-determination such as, preparing one's own meals, taking initiative in household chores, or picking a hobby or leisure time activity to pursue.

4. Be a Friend

Individuals with mental illnesses may feel isolated, especially if the severity of their illness prevents them from participating in certain activities or working. One of the best things for a person with a mental illness is having good friends and family members that genuinely love them. Remaining integrated in society, relationships, and family dynamics is beneficial for the recovery process.

Being close to someone with a mental illness can be hard sometimes. Your loved one is going through hard times and they may say or do things that are out of character or that they don't intend to be hurtful. Continue to love them and be their friend; set boundaries to ensure you do not get hurt physically or emotionally. Remember that your friend does not need another mental health professional. They need someone that they can laugh with, enjoy their time with, feel accepted by regardless of their illness, and that they can trust and depend on. Follow your family member or friend's cue; if they want to talk, be ready to listen. If they do not want to talk, support them and show that you are there for them when they are ready.

5. Take Care of Yourself

Those who give care to others are more likely to become physically and mentally unwell. Approximately 1 out of 4 caregivers of a person with a mental illness has depression themselves. The stress, worry, and emotional roller-coaster felt while being a caregiver has consequences if you do not take care of yourself. The following are things you can do as a caregiver in order to reduce your risk of becoming physically or mentally unwell:

Take time out for yourself

Caring for your own physical and mental health will help you take better care of your loved one. Continue to go to your own doctor appointments and other personal commitments. Do things that you enjoy by yourself, with your loved one and other family or friends. Taking a few minutes for yourself everyday will help you to recharge and help more effectively. You may feel selfish by taking time out for yourself, but remember that it will help both you and your loved one in the long run.

Get enough sleep

Finding enough time to sleep or sleeping without worrying is often hard for caregivers. Not getting enough sleep commonly leads to making poor decisions. Making sleep a priority is crucial to best helping your loved one. If you are having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or feeling rested when you wake up, check out The National Sleep Foundation.

Exercise

Exercise not only keeps you physically well but also increases your mental health. Those who are caregivers commonly feel they do not have time to exercise because they put their family or friend's needs before theirs. Be creative in your workout. It could be as simple as parking further away in a parking lot or planning a time to go to a gym.

Balance your life

Finding balance in your life is especially hard when you are a caregiver. By yourself and with your loved one, determine boundaries you will set in regards to ways you can and cannot help. This will help you to maintain control of your life and will help your loved one be active in their recovery process. As you say no to helping in certain ways, it is common to feel guilty, but there is nothing wrong caring for yourself.

Get help

Remember that therapists, counselors, and also support groups are not only for the individual with a mental illness. Seeking professional help will help you to be more aware of how you are doing, feel supported, and get answers to questions you may have while caregiving. Find an affiliate who can help you find local services.

Help is available. For additional information, visit MagellanHealth.com/MYMH

Source: Mental Health America

1. National Alliance on Mental Illness, *Mental illnesses: Treatment Saves Money & Makes Sense*, National Alliance on Mental Illness Fact Sheet, 2007.