Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Who is affected by mental illness?



Illnesses have a ripple effect – reaching beyond one individual to touch their family members, friends and coworkers. Mental illnesses are no exception. A mental health diagnosis may invoke feelings of embarrassment, shame, even fear and anger, isolating someone at a time when they most need care and support. In some cases, family and friends fail to understand that there's a fine line between supporting someone and enabling their unhealthy behaviors and that relinquishing control over the situation is often the hardest things to do. Ultimately, the individual must make the decisions necessary to help themselves.

The fear of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and prejudice causes many people to withdraw from society and society to withdraw from them. Yet social isolation is a huge risk factor for the development of some mental illnesses, especially depression and can greatly hinder recovery for all mental disorders. The World Health Organization declares stigma to be the "single most important barrier to overcome in the community."

One thing is clear: it`s difficult for anyone to deal with mental illness alone. A supportive network made up of family members, friends, coworkers, medical professionals and community agencies is essential for everyone involved.

Supporting a loved one with a mental illness

It's often hard to know how to support someone struggling with a mental illness. Here are some tips:

- **Be informed.** Finding out as much as you can about mental illness, treatments and what services are available in your area can help make you a valuable resource for your loved one.
- **Don't judge**. Mental illnesses are medical conditions, not moral weaknesses or character flaws. We wouldn't tell someone with pneumonia to "snap out of it" or "get it together", we'd encourage them to seek treatment. Reassure your loved one that you care about him and her.
- **Be available to support.** Offer to make calls, help with everyday tasks, find information or drive the individual to appointments. While social isolation can worsen many mental illnesses, especially depression, you should always ask first if they feel comfortable with the help you're

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offering. You can and should also ask how they're doing, but also talk about the things you've always talked about.

- **Develop coping strategies for challenging behaviors**. We've all done it. Snapped at our spouse, child or coworker because we have a cold or a sore back. We tend to direct our negative feelings at those closest to us. We don't mean to and we usually feel upset at our actions. The same is true for those suffering with a mental illness. However, iff challenging behaviors are leaving you feeling confused, embarrassed or upset, talk with your loved one's care team to develop some strategies. Keep in mind that such behaviors are probably not meant to be personal.
- **Have realistic expectations.** The recovery process is often not a straight line nor does it happen quickly. Know what to expect and that setbacks and relapses can occur.
- **Know what to do in a crisis**. Take any signs of self-harm or talk of suicide seriously and get help immediately. If the person has attempted suicide and needs medical attention, call your local emergency services number. Do not leave them alone.
- **Keep yourself well.** It's important that you care for your own physical and mental health, especially during times of stress. Try to follow a healthy diet, keep active, get enough sleep and find times to have fun! If you need support, talk to your family doctor, find a support group or see a therapist.

When someone has a mental illness, it can be emotionally and physically difficult for their family, friends and coworkers but when everyone comes together to create a strong support system, recovery is much more likely.

For more information on mental illness, resources in your area and support for both you and the people you care about, contact your Employee Assistance Program. You are not alone.