



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

tips for

supporting a friend or family member with a mental illness

info sheets 2013 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



"The most important thing families have to do is accept you completely, with all your faults. Families can help by saying "You're okay, we love you, and you'll get better."

—Mariam, 31, in recovery
from depression

It can be scary when someone you love is sick. It can be especially scary if they're diagnosed with a mental illness. It's hard to see someone you love in pain and it's confusing when someone you know well is not acting like themselves. You know how you would take care of them if they had a cold or flu, but what do you do for a mental illness? Like any other health problem, someone with a mental illness needs extra love and support. You may not be able to see the illness, but it doesn't mean that you're powerless to help.

How can I help?

Research confirms that support from family and friends is a key part of helping someone who is going through a mental illness. This support provides a network of practical and emotional help. These networks can be made up of parents, children, siblings, spouses or partners, extended families, close friends and others who care about us like neighbours, coworkers, coaches

and teachers. Some people have larger networks than others, but most of us have at least a few people who are there for us when we need them.

There are a number of major ways that family and friends can help in someone's journey of recovery from a mental illness:

supporting a friend or family member with a mental illness

how do I know when to help?

Some signs that a friend or family member may have a mental illness and could need your help are:

- They suddenly no longer have interest in hobbies and other interests they used to love
- They seem to feel angry or sad for little or no reason
- They don't seem to enjoy anything anymore
- They have told you about or seem to be hearing strange voices or having unsettling thoughts
- They seem emotionally numb, like they don't feel anything anymore
- They used to be healthy, but now they're always saying they feel a bit sick
- They eat a lot more or less than they used to
- Their sleep patterns have changed
- They seem to be anxious or terrified about situations or objects in life that seem normal to you and to others
- They've been missing more and more time from work or school
- They've been drinking heavily and/or using drugs to cope
- They are talking about taking their life or feeling hopeless
- They are avoiding their close friends and family members

Knowing when something is wrong—or right: Getting help early is an important part of treating mental illness. Family and friends are often the first ones to notice that something is wrong. See “How do I know when to help?” on the next page for signs to watch for. Finding a treatment that works is often a process of trial and error, so family members may also be the first to see signs of improvement.

- *How do I do this?*

TIP: Learn more about the signs and symptoms of different mental illnesses. Also learn more about how treatments work so that you know what side effects you may see, when to look for improvements and which ones to look for first. A recent review found that when the family is educated about the illness, the rates of relapse in their loved ones were reduced by half in the first year.

Seeking help: Families and friends can be important advocates to help loved ones get through those hard, early stages of having a mental illness. They can help their loved one find out what treatment is best for them. They can also be key in letting professionals know what's going on, filling in parts of the picture that the person who's ill may not be well enough to describe on their own.

- *How do I do this?*

TIP: Offer to make those first appointments with a family doctor to find out what's wrong or accompany your loved one to the doctor—these steps can be hard if your loved one doesn't have much energy or experiences problems with concentration. If you do accompany the person, work with them to write down any notes or questions either of you have in advance so that you cover all the major points. If your loved one wants to do it on their own, show them your support and ask them if there's anything you could do to help.

- **TIP:** You can't always prevent a mental health crisis from happening. If your loved one needs to go to hospital, try and encourage them to go on their own. If you're concerned that your loved one is at risk of harm, they may receive treatment under BC's Mental Health Act. It may be necessary in certain cases, but involuntary treatment can be complicated and traumatic for everyone. To learn more about the Mental Health Act, see the “Coping with Mental Health Crises and Emergencies” info sheet.

Helping with medications, appointments and treatments: If you spend a lot of time around your loved ones, you can help them remember to take their medications. You may also be able to help tell a doctor why medications aren't being taken as they should be. Similarly, you may be involved in reminding your loved one to do their counselling homework or use their light therapy treatment each morning, or reminding your loved one to make or keep appointments for treatment.

"Tom's recovery has been an exercise in patience, love and understanding. We take one step forward and stumble two steps back; baby steps—small increments of success, tiny improvements of things we would ordinarily take for granted—are things we celebrate. When Tom smiles, cracks a joke or declares that he wants to go for a run, they are positive, encouraging signs: baby steps forward."

— Family member from Family Toolkit

- *How do I do this?*

TIP: If you notice that your loved one is having trouble taking their medication, you can encourage them to talk to their doctor or pharmacist. They can suggest ways to make pill taking easier. If there are other problems with taking medicine, such as side effects, encourage your loved one to write down their concerns and questions and talk to their doctor. If they don't have a good relationship with their doctor, help them find a new one. If cost is a barrier, learn about BC's no-charge psychiatric medication coverage called Plan G.

Supporting a healthy lifestyle:

Families can also help with day-to-day factors such as finances, problem

solving, housing, nutrition, recreation and exercise, and proper sleeping habits.

- *How do I do this?*

TIP: See our Wellness Modules at www.heretohelp.bc.ca for practical tips on how to have a healthy lifestyle for both you and your loved one. Case managers and peer support workers at mental health centres in your community may be able to help with life skills training as well as connections to income and housing.

Providing emotional support: You can play an important role in helping someone who's not feeling well feel less alone and ashamed. They are not to blame for their illness, but they may feel that they are, or may be getting

that message from others. You can help encourage hope.

- *How do I do this?*

TIP: Try to be as supportive, understanding and patient as possible. See our "Where do I go from here?" section for resources on how to be a good communicator.

- **TIP:** Taking care of an ill family member or friend can be stressful. Remember that you need emotional support, too. Consider joining a support group for family members of people with mental illness. There, you can connect with other people going through the same things and they can help you work through your own emotions. It's very important to make sure you are taking care of your own mental health as well.



supporting a friend or family member with a mental illness

where do I go from here?

If you need advice on how to get your loved one the help they need, there are a number of resources available to you.

Other helpful resources are:

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for info sheets and personal stories about (illness). You'll also find more information, tips and self-tests to help you understand many different mental health problems.

Alzheimer Society of BC

Visit www.alzheimerbc.org or call 1-800-936-6033 (toll-free in BC) for information and community resources for individuals and families with dementia.

AnxietyBC

Visit www.anxietybc.com or call 604-525-7566 for information, tools, and community resources on anxiety.

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society

Visit www.bcss.org or call 1-888-888-0029 (toll-free in BC) or 604-270-7841 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on schizophrenia and other major mental illnesses and support for families.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health and mental illnesses.

FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health

Visit www.forcesociety.com or call 1-855-887-8004 (toll-free in BC) or 604-878-3400 (in the Lower Mainland) for information and resources that support parents of a young person with mental illness.

Jessie's Legacy at Family Services of the North Shore

Visit www.familyservices.bc.ca or call 1-888-988-5281 ext. 204 (toll-free in BC) or 604-988-5281 ext. 204 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and resources on body image and prevention of eating disorders.

Kelty Mental Health

Contact Kelty Mental Health at www.keltymentalhealth.ca or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

Mood Disorders Association of BC

Visit www.mdabc.net or call 604-873-0103 (in the Lower Mainland) or 1-855-282-7979 (in the rest of BC) for resources and information on mood disorders. You'll also find more information on support groups around the province.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

1-800-SUICIDE

If you are in distress or are worried about someone in distress who may hurt themselves, call 1-800-SUICIDE 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal.

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.