

Mental Illness in the Family

Wife, husband, parent, child, grandparent – if someone in your family has been diagnosed with a mental illness, you are probably feeling a mixture of emotions. Concern, compassion, anger, frustration, relief, anxiety, sadness, love, guilt...any and all of these emotions are understandable and normal. What can you do to help your family member, and just as important –what can you do to help yourself?

Don't play the Blame Game.

First of all, do not assume that you are to blame for your family member's illness. There are many reasons why mental illness occurs, and it is much more common than you may realize. Mental health problems affect people of all ages, genders, cultures, education and income levels. Studies indicate that in any given year, one in every five adults under age 65 will have a mental health problem. Furthermore it is likely that mental illness will indirectly touch everyone at some time because a family member, friend or colleague experiences mental illness.

What Causes Mental Illness?

Ongoing research points to complex combinations of genetics, biology, and physical and social environments as the main contributors to mental illness. There is no simple answer but we can say that the brain and the body interact in ways that produce the symptoms of mental illness. Lifestyle, family environment, economic status, substance abuse, stress levels and trauma can also play a role in the onset, or relapse of symptoms. Conversely, these factors can also be positive factors in helping your family member travel the road to recovery.

Is There a Cure?

Serious mental illnesses are often chronic; in other words, they may be life-long. That is NOT to say that the symptoms are always active. With treatment and support, the symptoms of mental illness are treatable and can go into remission. Like any disorder – physical or mental – treatment will vary, depending on the illness. Treatments include counseling, medication, support and training by mental health professionals. You too can play an important role as a member of the team, however you need to keep in mind that the responsibility and choices around recovery are up to the individual affected, not the family. Except in cases where mental illness is affecting minor-aged children, parents play an important – but secondary role – around treatment.

Learn All You Can about Mental Illness and Recovery.

So where does that leave you? It is very important for you to learn all you can about the particular mental illness that is affecting your family member. Go to your library or bookstore and get books on the topic. Talk to the mental health care team; they can give you general information about the illness (although not the specifics of your family member's treatment), medications and other sources of reliable facts. Contact community organizations such as the MHA of Westmoreland County (www.mhawc.org or 724-824-6351). Information, support and help are just a click or a phone call away.

Remember – Information is Power.

It gives you the insight to understand that what is happening to your loved one is not personal; it is not about your relationship with him or her. It is about an illness that is causing behavior that is unusual and beyond the control of the affected person.

Who is Taking Care of You?

When a member of the family develops a mental illness, he or she often becomes the focal point of everyone's energy. But who is taking care of your needs? Coping with a relative who has a mental health issue can leave you feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, vulnerable to other people's opinions about you, angry, isolated and helpless. Here are some tips to help you:

- **Accept your own feelings and know that you are not alone.** It is natural to feel a range of emotions when you have a relative with mental illness. Other families experience the same challenges and complex mixture of emotion, just like you. Accept your feelings; they are understandable. Then ask yourself – what do I need to do?
- **Stay connected.** Embarrassment, social stigma and fear – these are just some of the reasons why people cut themselves off from friends and the rest of the family when a relative develops mental illness. As a result, people become isolated at the very time in their lives when they need the support of their social network to sustain them. Talk to your family and friends; let them know what is happening. Trust them to be there for you, just as you would be there for them. Overcome your own stigma about mental illness and realize that there is nothing to be ashamed about.
- **Join a Support Group.** It is also a good idea to join a support group for families – this is a great place for you to vent, share your emotions and develop positive coping strategies with others who are going through the same issues as you. You can also help others by sharing your ideas, sorrows and successes. Call **MHA of Westmoreland County at 724-834-6351** for local support groups.
- **Take time for yourself.** If you have a relative with a mental illness, you may have been cast into the role of a caregiver. Whether that is part-time or full-time, you have been drafted into responsibilities that take up your physical and emotional energy. For that reason, it is essential that you take time for yourself. You need to regularly re-charge your own batteries and renew your spirit before you lose perspective. Schedule opportunities that allow you to relax, have fun and get away – make time for yourself so you can come back to your family with a balanced, healthy outlook on life. You can't care for someone else if you haven't cared for yourself first.
- **Seek help for yourself.** Living with someone who has a mental illness can be very stressful for the entire family – don't underestimate the impact and don't overestimate your ability to cope all by yourself. For that reason, we encourage you to get therapy for yourself and the rest of the family members – don't be embarrassed to reach out and get help. You need to stay healthy, both mentally and physically, in order to help your loved one. Do it for them, if not for yourself.

Develop day to day coping strategies.

There may be times when your relative exhibits odd, anti-social or challenging behaviors. This could occur privately, or in public, leaving you confused, embarrassed or scared. Speak to your family member's health care team and get assistance in developing effective strategies for de-escalating the situation. Remember:

- Plan in advance.
- Know what actions and options you can undertake.
- Understand that this is not personal.
- Realize that the behavior is beyond your relative's control and can be as distressing to them as it is to you.

- It is also vital for you to understand and communicate to your relative, that you have rights as well. Quietly and calmly tell them that you have a right to not be abused – verbally, emotionally or physically. At no time should you tolerate dangerous or assaultive behavior. Don't endanger your own emotional or physical well-being because you are trying to shelter your family member from distress.

What to do in a crisis.

In spite of treatment and any planning that you might do, your loved one's symptoms may become severe from time to time. Encourage them to see their psychiatrist right away or to go to a hospital emergency department. Remember, the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome. If your relative refuses to cooperate and their symptoms persist, you have some choices. This is a time when your support network can be particularly helpful in sorting out the best course of action. If there is a friend who is aware of the issues, solicit their help in trying to persuade your relative to seek help. Talk to people in your support group and find out what their suggestions would be under similar circumstances.

With or without your relative's permission, you can also call their psychiatrist and relate the situation. The psychiatrist will not be able to discuss your relative's condition with you, but should be receptive to hearing facts about the current situation. Be as concise and factual as you can be under the circumstances; if you get emotional, your observations might be dismissed as dramatic and counter-productive. Before there is a crisis, find out if there is a psychiatric crisis program in your area. Call them and find out what services they offer.

If your family member poses an imminent danger to themselves or to others, then you must act for everyone's well-being. Call the Westmoreland County Crisis Hotline at 1-800-836-6010; they can provide phone support, mobile crisis support, and a Crisis Residential program for adults. You may also call 911 and tell the police what is happening; your description and their assessment will determine whether or not your relative is taken to a hospital for assessment. In general, an individual can be committed to a hospital if one of the following criteria is met:

- If the person is a danger to themselves, suicidal or self-harming
- If they are a danger to others or homicidal
- If they are unable to care for themselves to the extent that they pose a risk to themselves.

Your observations are important and can be of assistance in determining the right approach.

Community Supports

Help is available through Westmoreland County's Base Service Unit—Westmoreland Casemanagement and Supports, Inc. at 1-800-353-6467. Their website is www.wcsi.org. They offer case management as well as referrals to many supports to assist with housing, mental health treatment, drop-in centers, and various other programs which may be invaluable to achieving stability and recovery. This may be the most important phone call to make to get the help your family needs.