

# Giving Support to Someone *Close to You*



If you have a family member or friend who has been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, you

are probably wondering what you can do to help. New forms of therapy, medications and community services have enabled many individuals to lead full, independent lives, but support from family, friends and peers remains an essential element in the recovery process.

There are many ways you can help someone close to you as they cope with a mental illness, navigate the treatment system and work towards recovery. As in any relationship, emotional and practical support is always needed. Occasionally, families and friends participate in someone's recovery by offering transportation, financial and housing assistance. Whatever form it takes, your support, compassion and respect matter.

Knowing when and how to give support can be difficult to figure out. Though you may feel protective of your family member or friend, remember that learning to manage one's own affairs, pursuing goals and becoming independent are important aspects of an individual's recovery from mental illness.

## Medication Issues

Many individuals with mental illness take some type of medication to help control their symptoms. For those with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, this may involve taking antipsychotic medications.

Antipsychotic treatments have improved tremendously over the past 10 years. But, like any medication, they can also cause side-effects that lead to other problems and may even make your family member or friend feel worse. As a result, your family member or friend may want or decide to stop taking their medication.

Individuals with serious mental illness may not feel comfortable discussing their symptoms, feelings or medication side-effects with family members and friends. However, a key element in recovery is a productive, two-way communication between patient and doctor – what the National Mental Health Association calls a *Dialogue for Recovery*. Developing this type of relationship – based on mutual respect and open communication – with a team of healthcare professionals can make a big difference in helping your family member or friend recover.

Here are some tips for supporting someone close to you:

## Support Strategies

- Educate yourself about the diagnosis, symptoms of the illness and side-effects from antipsychotic treatments and other medications. Local Mental Health Associations, public libraries and the Internet are good resources to learn about mental illnesses and treatment options.
- Recognize that your family member or friend may be scared and confused after receiving a diagnosis. Though some people are relieved to receive a diagnosis and actively seek treatment, it may feel devastating to others and bring on stressful feelings.
- Listen carefully to your family member or friend and express your understanding back to him or her. Recognize the feelings he or she is experiencing and don't discount them, even if you believe them to be symptoms of the illness.

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- Encourage your family member or friend to become an active partner with his or her treatment team and to gain knowledge about what treatments and services will help in his or her recovery.
- Recognize that it may take time for your family member or friend to find the proper medications and dosages that work.
- Understand that recovery from mental illness isn't simply a matter of "just staying on one's medications." Self-esteem, social support and a feeling of contributing to society are also essential elements in the recovery process.
- Encourage your family member or friend to speak immediately to his or her healthcare provider about any problems related to medications. Your support in encouraging an ongoing *Dialogue for Recovery* can benefit the person's recovery.
- Obtain the Antipsychotic Side-effects Checklist (ASC) and help your family member or friend fill it out, but only if he or she wants help. Encourage him or her to bring it to the next doctor's appointment. A copy of the checklist is available at NMHA's Web site, [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org).
- Offer to accompany your family member or friend to medical and other appointments and, if he or she wants you to, discuss medication and side-effects with the doctor and the treatment team of social workers, nurses or other professionals.
- Always respect the individual's need for and right to privacy. A person with a mental illness has the same right to be treated with dignity and respect as any other person.



For more information or to obtain additional *Dialogue for Recovery* materials, please contact your local Mental Health Association, or

National Mental Health Association  
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800-969-NMHA (6642)  
[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)



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