

# **WAYS TO CREATE A LOW- STRESS ATMOSPHERE**

The Training and Education Center Network  
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Handout-R88  
Chapter 3-9

## WAYS TO CREATE A LOW-STRESS ATMOSPHERE

- I. Learn the symptoms of the illness that are usually uncontrollable and try to tolerate them.

**Examples:** Periodic departure from normal eat/sleep habits.  
Delusions or disordered thinking.  
Hallucinations.  
Withdrawal to a quiet, private place.  
Inappropriate social behavior.

It is not helpful to persist in thinking your ill relative has control over these symptoms. This attitude will only make you more hostile. Just because your relative may have learned what to say and what not to say to keep from getting involuntarily committed, remember that only his state of panic is allowing him this temporary façade of control.

- II. Speak in a calm voice when your relative is in hearing range. Screaming, yelling, crying, and other emotional ways of relating can be too upsetting and stimulating.
- III. When you must criticize intolerable behavior, use short “I get \_\_\_\_\_ when you do \_\_\_\_\_” statements, directed at only ONE behavior. It is not helpful to make general critical or hostile statements towards your relative. Remember, his/her screen is shattered.
- IV. When you must stop a dangerous or intolerable behavior, warn your relative of a consequence for continuing that behavior, then FOLLOW THROUGH CONSISTENTLY. Setting no limits on your ill relative, especially when s/he is out of control, can create a very tense atmosphere.
- V. If your ill relative lives with you, try to stick to regular routines. Inconsistency is stressful.
- VI. Set realistic expectations for your ill relative. Comparing what s/he is able to do now to six months ago may be helpful. Unrealistically high expectations only add pressure and set him/her up for failure. Unrealistically low expectations can be demeaning.
- VII. Avoid criticism and conflict with other family members when your ill relative is around. Living in this atmosphere can be very upsetting and stressful for him/her.

VIII. Force yourself to keep up a life of your own even if it seems difficult or unnatural!

**Examples:** Work at a paying or volunteer job.  
 Maintain or develop friendships and social activities.  
 Keep up your hobbies or special interests.  
 Take day trips, weekend trips, vacations.

\*Over involvement with your ill relative and centering the family's resources on him/her, especially if combined with abandonment of the family's former activities, can put a lot of pressure on your relative and add to his/her burden of guilt.

IX. If your relative is experiencing a psychotic episode, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- A. Use short, clear, direct sentences. Using long explanations can make it difficult for him/her to stay focused on what you are saying.

**Example:** Say, "Please wash your coffee cups." Don't say, "I get so tired of having to do everything around here. You're home all day and still there's all your dishes in the sink."

- B. Avoid initiating intense emotional interactions and physical contact, even positive ones.

**Example:** Initiating a hug or kiss.  
 Saying "I love you" if he hasn't said it first.

It can be too overwhelming if you do these things at a time when your relative is not ready, so let him/her lead.

- C. Handle hallucinations and delusions by understanding and acknowledging that these experiences are real for your relative.

1. What may be helpful:

- a. Treat hallucinations and delusions as you would serious and sometimes terrifying symptoms of other illnesses.

**Example:** If someone was having chest pains you would not simply say, "I know the pain is real for you, but it's not real for me." You would take it seriously and offer support.

**Example:** If your son was having a paranoid delusion that the Mafia was after him, you could be supportive by saying, “It must be terrifying to believe that the Mafia is after you.”

- b. Give your relative an opportunity to describe what s/he is experiencing.

**Example:** “What are the voices saying?”

- c. Leave your relative alone if that’s what s/he seems to want.
- d. If the hallucination or delusion becomes more than you can handle, leave, and if necessary, get help.

2. What is not helpful:

- a. Trying to talk your relative out of these experiences (unless s/he accepts the fact that these experiences are part of the illness).
- b. Pretending that you also have these experiences.
- c. Underestimating or minimizing the intensity (and sometimes terror) of these experiences.
- d. Ignoring hallucinations and delusions.

3. There is a limit to how much sympathy and support any one person can offer if symptoms persist or become very intense.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Homework

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**CREATING A LOW STRESS ATMOSPHERE**

- 1. List three things that might be too stimulating for a person suffering from schizophrenia.

---

---

---

---

- 2. Would setting house rules for unacceptable behavior of your ill relative be better or worse for him/her? Please explain.

---

---

---

---

- 3. List two things that would **not** be helpful to a person who is hallucinating.

---

---

---

---

- 4. If an ill person wants somebody in the family to be home with him/her at all times, what should you do?

---

---

---