Mental Illness and Extending your Hand

It’s upsetting to see a friend or family member struggle with a physical illness or injury, but at least you know how to help. But when someone you care about is struggling with a mental illness, you can feel both confused and powerless because you don’t understand their condition and have no idea what to do. Yet for the mentally ill, a supportive network of friends and family members is essential.

We’re all touched by mental illness. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, one in five of us will experience a mental illness at some time in our lives. The rest of us will be affected by a family member, friend or colleague with a mental illness. Despite this, many people suffer in silence, either thinking they’ll “snap out of it” or afraid they’ll be labelled as “crazy.”

What makes it easier to seek help, stick to treatment and make necessary lifestyle changes is the practical help and emotional support of families, friends, co-workers and employers. Loved ones are also the first to notice something is wrong and the first to see whether medication is working or not.

Extending Your Hand

The first step in helping someone with a mental illness is to understand their condition. This will provide insight into what the person is going through and what you can expect. Like physical illnesses, mental illnesses can be mild or severe. Some require ongoing management and others can be overcome with medication, lifestyle changes and/or counselling. There are many types of mental illness, but the most common include:

- **Anxiety disorders**: phobias, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and general anxiety disorder.
- **Mood disorders**: depression and bipolar disorder.
- **Eating disorders**: anorexia and bulimia.
- **Schizophrenia**
- **Substance abuse**: dependence on alcohol, tobacco, legal or illegal drugs or other substances.
- **Trauma and Stressor Related Disorders**: post-traumatic stress and acute stress disorders
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Armed with an understanding of what your friend or family member is dealing with, you can provide necessary support with the following.

- **Ask what he or she needs.**³ Tell your friend you support him or her and want to help. Everyone copes in different ways and needs different types of help. Offer to accompany him or her to a medical appointment or help with household chores, such as paying bills or cooking.

- **Spend time together.**⁴ Social isolation is a major risk factor to either developing or worsening many mental illnesses, especially depression. Just hanging out together is great therapy and lets him or her know you care. Ask how they’re doing but also talk about the things you’ve always talked about.

- **Understand this is an illness.**⁵ Phrases like “Cheer up”, or “Pull yourself together,” not only won’t help but will make the individual feel that they are to blame for being ill. Just as someone can’t “snap out” of diabetes, neither can someone “snap out” of depression.

- **Check in.**⁶ It can take time to find the right medications or for counselling to make an impact. Check in with the individual regularly to make sure they are okay and that they are following the treatment plan. Continue to offer your help so your friend can concentrate on recovery or properly managing his or her illness.

- **Listen.**⁷ Take any signs of self-harm or talk of suicide seriously and get help immediately. Call your local crisis service or the police, or take the person to the emergency room of your local hospital. Do not leave him or her alone. If the person has attempted suicide and needs medical attention, call 9-1-1 or your local emergency services number.

Helping someone you care about deal with any illness – physical or mental – can be challenging. Remember to not ignore your own physical and mental wellbeing and to contact your Employee Assistance Program if you need information, support or resources.⁸

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1. Canadian Mental Health Association – British Columbia Division
2. Public Health Agency of Canada
3. Healthy Place.com
4. Time to change
5. Time to change
6. Healthy Place.com
7. HealthLink BC
8. Canadian Mental Health Association

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We want your questions, comments, and suggestions—lifelines@homewoodhealth.com

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