

# Understanding and Coping with Mental Illness for Family and Friends

The following are some important things for family members and friends to remember when coping with mental illness.

## Understanding and Coping with Mental Illness

- Realize that mental illness is not rare. You are not alone. In fact, one in five Canadians has or will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives.
- NO ONE IS TO BLAME. Never blame yourself. It can destroy your chances of coping. Mental illness is a disorder of the brain/mind.
- Accept that mental illness is complex and it affects each person and family differently. As a family member, you cannot cure your loved one's mental illness but you can help in their recovery.
- It is natural to experience a range of emotions such as grief, guilt, fear, anger, sadness, hurt, confusion, etc. You are responsible for your feelings and journey through your loved one's recovery.
- Information is power. Learn as much as possible, as soon as possible. There are organizations, groups, websites and agencies with information and resources at your disposal.
- Do not shoulder the entire responsibility for your ill relative yourself. Seek professional helpers that are effective. Identify them by their compassionate nature, informative style, and eagerness to have you as their ally. Consider their ability to ensure you receive comprehensive education in understanding and coping with mental illness.
- Look for support from people who have been through this. Contact a self-help group to share your thoughts and feelings. There are groups for specific diagnoses, family groups, consumer support groups.
- Pay great attention to the needs of the other family members. Sometimes we spend so much time dealing with the illness that we forget our other relationships.
- If you cannot care for yourself, you cannot care for another.
- Be aware that spending massive amounts of time with the person who has a mental illness can make matters worse. It is important to have boundaries and set clear limits.
- Your ill relative is entitled to his/her own life journey, as you are.
- Change is difficult to handle and going out of the house, to gatherings or events may be overwhelming at first. Respect this. It's a process.
- Keep optimistic and hopeful.
- Keep an open mind about your loved one's recovery.
- Maintain and establish friendships, activities and hobbies, particularly those that take you outside the home.
- Set your sights on appropriate independence for your loved one and yourself.
- Be realistic in your expectations of your ill relative. Help them to set and fulfill realistic life goals. They may not be able to nor wish to return to full-time employment or school. Taking on more than one can handle can really impact a person's ability to recover.
- Don't be surprised to discover that in the end, it is the ability to change, to look at things differently which distinguishes people who will cope, from those who will not.
- Take very good care of yourself.

“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes”  
-Marcel Proust