

Helping a Loved One with a Mental Disorder

Mental illness can be a difficult ordeal, and people suffering from it need the support and understanding of those around them. However, it is not always easy for their loved ones to know how to help. While there are no ready-made solutions, this brochure offers suggestions that you may find useful if someone close to you is suffering from a mental disorder.

/ Understanding Mental Disorders

Mental disorders can affect men and women of any age, from any social background or cultural community. In Canada, **one in five people develop some form of mental disorder over the course of their lifetime.** Such disorders include depression, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, personality disorders, eating disorders, and other mental illnesses.

Learning about a loved one's illness allows you to better understand what he or she is feeling and better equips you to help. As well, by learning about the realities of mental illness, you are helping eliminate the stigma associated with such diseases.

To obtain information, do not hesitate to consult a health care professional or contact one of the numerous associations that support people with mental disorders. The last page of this brochure contains a list of suggested references.

Adjusting to the Situation

All mental disorders cause, to varying degrees, **changes in mood, thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others.** These changes not only have consequences on the daily lives of people who are ill, but also on the lives of those around them.

It is sometimes difficult to be around people who feel sad or irritable as a result of their disorder. One doesn't always know how to react to unusual behaviour or perceptions that seem irrational. People suffering from a mental illness may have trouble taking care of themselves and their dependents, or it may be impossible for them to work or attend school for a certain period. These difficulties in a loved one's life can have an impact on your own obligations.

Certain strategies are useful for adjusting to the repercussions of a loved one's mental illness in our life:

- take things one day at a time and deal with problems one by one;
- adjust your expectations—both of the person with the disorder and of yourself;
- respect each person's pace as much as possible; and
- let go when faced with situations you cannot change.

ENDORSED BY:

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Emotions

Listening

People suffering from a mental illness experience serious emotional turmoil, whether due to the illness itself or to the consequences it has on their lives. For example, they may have to change certain habits, which may require them to make painful choices. It is understandable that they then experience strong emotions such as anger.

The main thing you can do to help a loved one with a mental disorder feel better is to **listen** patiently, without judgment or any kind of pressure. If you invite your loved one to talk about what he or she is feeling and your offer is turned down, it is best to respect his or her pace and just say that you remain **available if you are needed**.

However, it is essential to learn not to let the emotions and suffering of the person who is ill overwhelm you, a challenge that health care professionals or workers in support organizations can help you face.

Recognizing Your Own Emotions

The illness of a loved one may also cause you to experience emotions such as worry, sadness, anger, frustration, and helplessness. It is possible that you will feel a sense of loss because the person is not the way he or she used to be, or the way you imagined he or she to be. The situation sometimes seems unfair, and you may even wonder whether you are somehow responsible for the state your loved one is in.

People close to someone who is ill each react differently, depending on their age and experience. Talking about your emotions helps you take a step back and better manage what you are going through. Several options are available: confiding in a friend, consulting a health care professional or contacting one of the community organizations mentioned on the last page of this brochure.

If you need to share your feelings with the person who is ill, your message will be better understood if you communicate in a constructive manner, namely by talking about yourself and your own feelings without judging or blaming the other person.

Seeing Beyond the Illness

The illness should not take up all the room in the relationship you have with your loved one, who remains a unique individual with tastes, skills and qualities. By paying attention to what you appreciate in this person and finding ways to spend enjoyable time in his or her company, you contribute to maintaining a healthy relationship, in spite of his or her illness.

Everyday Life

Encouraging Autonomy

Even though you must acknowledge that his or her condition may have certain limitations, it is best to encourage your loved one to maintain as much autonomy as possible. Allowing him or her to carry out certain tasks and take on responsibilities promotes his or her self-confidence and self-esteem. This attitude also protects you from the risk of burning out.

Taking Care of Yourself

In order to avoid burning out physically and psychologically, it is important to respect your own limits and to ask for help when you feel you need it. It is also important to take care of yourself: eat healthy foods, be active, see your friends, and find opportunities to have fun and enjoy yourself. If you neglect your own needs, you risk burning out and compromising not only your health, but also your ability to help others.

Avoiding Isolation

Too many people fear the stigma associated with mental illness and withdraw when a member of their family is suffering from a mental disorder. Yet being surrounded by people you can count on allows you to talk about your worries, gain some perspective on events and give yourself some time off to recharge your batteries.

If you take the time to explain to others what the person with the disorder is going through, you'll probably receive understanding and support from the people around you. If your loved one's illness leads to embarrassing behaviour in social situations, it is possible to overcome feelings of awkwardness by bringing up the issue directly with the people involved.

Self-help groups may allow you to share your experiences, meet others who have gone through the same situation as you and better understand what your loved one is experiencing.

Treatment

Staying Confident

With support and appropriate treatment, **people affected by a mental disorder can recover**. In many cases, this means being cured. When the person must live with a disorder that requires long-term treatment, recovery means resuming a balanced and satisfying life, in spite of the illness.

The treatment of mental disorders is generally based on a combination of **psychotherapy, medication** and **strategies to regain one's balance**.

Encouraging Commitment to the Treatment

Remaining committed to treatment is key to recovery, but you must recognize that many people with a disorder are tempted to stop or to modify part of their treatment at a certain point, for all sorts of reasons.

By encouraging your loved one to follow the treatment as it was prescribed, you contribute to his or her recovery.

- If he or she has concerns or questions, or has difficulty with a particular aspect of the treatment, suggest that he or she talk about it with a health care professional.
- If he or she wants to stop taking medication, reiterate the importance of first obtaining the opinion of a doctor or pharmacist.
- If he or she appears discouraged, invite him or her to remain hopeful. Improving or regaining one's balance requires time and true commitment.

Intervening in a Case of Crisis

If you fear that someone suffering from a mental illness may be a danger to him- or herself or to others, this is an emergency situation. The person in crisis needs to consult a doctor immediately. If he or she refuses to do so or is not apt to make such a decision, don't hesitate to **dial 9-1-1** so that he or she can be taken to a hospital. Even if doing so is difficult, the purpose is to protect the individual and the people around him or her.



Preventing Suicide

The majority of people who commit suicide or attempt to do so suffer from a mental illness. Suicide is the result of a state of deep exhaustion and despair. People considering it can no longer imagine that any other solution will end their suffering, and they need help to find a way out. Most suicidal people show **signs of distress** before acting. Noticing these signs could save their lives. For example, you may notice your loved one in a depressed mood, changing his or her behaviour, withdrawing, giving away important possessions, or else saying things like “I’d rather not be here any more,” or “You’d be better off without me.”

Up until the very last minute, it is possible to intervene to prevent someone from committing suicide.

- **Ask them directly whether they are considering suicide.** If so, ask how, where and when they are planning to do it. The more specific the plan, the greater the risk that they will act quickly. Caution: **with teenagers**, the interval between thinking suicidal thoughts and acting on them is often much shorter.
- **Listen attentively** as they express what they are feeling, without trying to minimize their suffering and problems.
- **Encourage them to get help** and accompany them in seeking it. For example, you can suggest calling **1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)** to reach an organization from the **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide**.
- **If the person is ready to act, it is an emergency: call 9-1-1 immediately and either stay with the person or remain in contact with him or her until emergency services arrive.**

Resources Available to You

HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- Your **doctor** or **pharmacist**
- The **CLSC** or **CSSS** in your area
www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss
- **Ordre des psychologues du Québec**
www.ordrepsy.qc.ca / 1 800 561-1223
- **Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec**
www.optsq.org / 1 888 731-9420
- Professional services at **school or work**
- **Info-Santé**
Dial **8-1-1**
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Douglas Institute**
www.douglas.qc.ca

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- **Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale**
(Federation of families and friends of people with mental illnesses)
www.ffapamm.com / 1 800 323-0474
- **Mental Illness Foundation**
www.mentalillnessfoundation.org
1 888 529-5354
- **Canadian Mental Health Association**
www.cmha.ca
- **Revivre**
Quebec Anxiety, Depressive and Bipolar Disorder Support Association
www.revivre.org / 1 866 REVIVRE (738-4873)

• Help Online

www.aideenligne.ca/en / 1 866 766-5620

- **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide**
24 hours a day, 7 days a week everywhere in Québec
www.aqps.info
1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)
- In case of an **emergency, dial 9-1-1.**

Good to know!

The **CSSS (CLSC)** in your area can provide you with information about the family support programs you may be eligible for.

PASS THIS BROCHURE ON!

The information in this brochure should not be interpreted as providing a medical diagnosis, and should not take the place of consultation with a health care professional.

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