

CARERS: UNDERSTANDING THE ILLNESS

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**WayAhead
Mental Health Information Service
Level 5, 80 William St
Woolloomooloo NSW 2011**

**1300 794 991
info@wayahead.org.au
www.wayahead.org.au**

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**“I hide
how I feel,
because she
has enough
problems
as it is”**

Carer

Being diagnosed with a mental disorder or mental illness can be a frightening and confusing experience for any person. It can also be difficult for the person's family, relatives and friends.

How does mental illness affect a person?

Learning how mental illness is affecting someone close to you, and understanding what they are going through, is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a carer's role. Very often, the behaviour of someone living with mental illness is misunderstood. A common misconception is that "people with mental illness are lazy and weak. If they tried hard enough they could snap out of it!"

Although each person's experience of their mental illness is individual, they are likely to face a number of difficulties including:

- Fear about the onset of another episode
- Confusion or anger about the illogical or irrational nature of their inner world
- Anger or bitterness about the impact mental illness has on their life
- Feeling judged or criticised by others
- Isolation in response to both the real or perceived rejection from friends, relatives and work colleagues
- Feeling abandoned by family, friends or professionals.

These can all lead to a sense of despair, loss of interest or lack of energy and motivation.

As a carer, learning to understand the impact mental illness can have on your loved one is very important.

Finding people who can answer your questions and talk through any difficulties you have is vital. It may be helpful to discuss things with the treating team, for example; the case manager or psychiatrist working with your loved one.

Due to confidentiality laws, there may be some matters which cannot be discussed in respect to specific details about the person's treatment.

Carers need to understand that the person living with a mental health disorder, or a mental health illness, has the right to know about, and participate in their care.

Furthermore, a person who cannot make choices related to their mental health alone is entitled to learn of their rights and be supported as they make decisions.

What expectations should I have?

It is normal to grieve for the person that you knew prior to their mental illness. They may not be capable of doing some of the things they previously did or enjoyed. It's also important that you are likely feeling a sense of loss and sadness as well.

Many carers envisage that 'recovery' means the person will be able to function as they were before the onset of their illness. Whilst this may be true for some, it is best to not have any expectations of what their recovery brings.

These expectations may carry over to the person with the illness, who may also feel they are not progressing. Expectations of employment or schooling may simply be unreasonable at times, but could be possible at other times. Therefore, learning to validate positive changes is important.

Realistic signs of progress could be as simple as:

- When the person starts eating with family again
- When the person starts having daily showers
- When the person wishes to wear different clothes each day
- When the person wishes to go for a walk close-by

Is there any hope?

One of the most important ways a carer can help is by instilling hope of a more positive future. Often, the person experiencing mental illness may not be able to believe there may be “better days ahead”.

Helping them have a more positive outlook can demonstrate your support. Remembering too, that as a carer, it may be necessary to gently remind the person about essential hygiene or nutritious food intake on a daily basis.

Communication

Conversation and communication can become challenging when carers feel their messages are not being heard. This could be because the person is preoccupied with other thoughts, or because their relationship with you or others has changed due to their illness.

Some hints for improving interpersonal communication:

- Face the other person and where appropriate, use eye contact.
- Do not rush but rather speak in a calm manner and tone.
- Use active listening in all communication. For conversation to progress successfully, it's essential that you receive and confirm the exact meaning of what is being conveyed through words, thoughts or feelings.
- Likewise, ensure your message is understood.
- Rephrase your message if necessary, however, do not lose the exact meaning.
- Take time out. If you are not able to get your message across, return to the issue or subject once you are both receptive and refreshed.
- Whenever breaks are taken, use respectful silence. Recommence communication with short summaries to make sure you are both understanding the same story.

How Do I Resolve Problems?

It can be tempting to make decisions for someone living with a mental illness, rather than helping them arrive at a decision themselves. The use of problem solving techniques will help in making the decision themselves, or with your support.

For example:

They may say; "I am not sure whether to attend the support group today."

Instinctively, you may respond with: "It's good for you, you should go."

Instead, try: "What did you think of the session last time?" or "How did you feel after the last meeting?"

By doing this, you can help them to see the benefits or disadvantages of attending the support group themselves.

Learn

The more informed you are, the better resourced you are to offer support. Learn to understand the symptoms they are experiencing, what their treatment options are and what services are available in their area.

Carer workshops are offered in each mental health service area across NSW. These are designed to help you understand the issues involved in caring for someone living with a mental illness or mental disorder, and allows you to meet other people in similar situations.

Changes to the Mental Health Act (2014) involve a greater carer involvement regarding treatment, decision making and provide better dissemination of information.



Where do I go for help?

The WayAhead Directory

is an online resource providing a comprehensive list of mental health related services in NSW.

www.WayAhead.org.au

Phone Lines

WayAhead Mental Health Information Line

1300 794 991

Contact your doctor or local GP

Mental Health Carers ARAFMI

1800 655 198

Carers Line

1800 242 636

Australian Psychological Society

1800 333 497

Useful Websites

Mental Health Carers ARAFMI

www.arafmi.org

Commonwealth Carers Respite Centers

www.centrelink.gov.au

Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI)

www.copmi.net.au

Carers NSW

www.carersnsw.asn.au

Human Services - Carers Support

www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/themes/carers

Sane

www.sane.org



Translating & Interpreting Service
(TIS) 131 450

Please call the Mental Health Information Line through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Free to Australian citizens or permanent residents.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW.

The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

Last reviewed by Jamie Saltoon 2016

**“ I found people who
understood exactly what I
was going through ”**



