

Practical suggestions

Symptoms such as mood swings, confused thinking, hallucinations, delusions, or panic and anxiety can be threatening and perplexing to your family member with mental illness and those around them.

A person who experiences these frightening symptoms may become seriously depressed, withdrawn and maybe even suicidal. Occasionally a person will display uncharacteristic levels of anger and violence.

Here are some suggestions to help:

- Within the family, try to reduce the level of stress. While stress does not cause disorders such as psychosis or bipolar illness, it can make the symptoms worse.
- Try to maintain calm at home. No one, whether or not they have a mental illness, responds well to criticism, nagging, or raised voices.
- Sometimes the illness makes a person excessively sensitive to noise levels, or unable to sort out complicated discussions. If your family member is having problems with concentration and thinking, speak quietly, slowly, politely and one at a time to avoid confusion and irritation.
- If your family member's behaviour becomes dangerous to themselves or to others, seek help immediately. The safety of your family member and your own safety, should always come first. Ring 111 for Police assistance if there is immediate danger or risk. Emergency mental health services are listed in the telephone directory and are free of charge.

Supporting Families in Mental
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Mental Illness

How
families
and friends
can Help



Mental Illness

What should I know about mental illness?

- Mental illness is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors which together can result in a major change in a person's behaviour, emotions or thinking.
- There are several different types of mental illness. These include major depression, panic-anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Often these illnesses are caused by or complicated by drug or alcohol abuse.
- Every year as many as one in five New Zealanders will experience a mental illness.
- Episodes of mental illness can be a once only episode for some people, others experience periodic recurrence, while others experience enduring symptoms.
- Effective treatment usually involves a variety of approaches which include education about the illness, medication, psychological counselling, and employment support to maintain skills, an income, and links to friends and workmates.
- The best outcomes occur when treatment takes place in the early stages of the illness and often when the family/whanau is involved in the recovery process.

How will mental illness affect my family/whanau?

When a family member experiences a mental illness, it affects your whole family. You will experience many emotions such as anxiety, worry, confusion and fear. You may be unsure about how to act, or who to turn to for help. Because of discrimination and misunderstanding associated with mental illness, you may be reluctant to discuss what is happening with your friends and your usual support network.

You may be experiencing feelings of guilt – it is common for families to blame themselves, or to blame one another when a loved one is affected by mental illness. However there is no evidence that family environment is a major cause.

You may also be feeling anxious and uncertain about the future and what it will mean for your loved one's education, employment, or quality of life; and also what it will mean for yourself and other family/whanau members.

What can my family/whanau and friends do to help?

Be aware of the early signs

If you are worried that a family member or friend is in the early stages of a mental illness, or you feel that something is not quite right, there are warning signs you should be aware of:

- Deterioration of school work or work performance
- Disrupted or changed sleep patterns
- Becoming withdrawn, particularly from friends
- Anxiety, panic, fear

Mental illness can be hard to diagnose in the early stages because there are other things that can cause similar changes – for example, normal teenage moodiness. Discuss your concerns with your GP or another health professional.

Be informed

If you are the main support or carer for your family/whanau member or friend experiencing mental illness, being knowledgeable and informed will put you in a better position to support them. You are entitled to information and education from your local mental health service.

The newest approaches to mental health care mean that a person's family or support network is included in care and treatment. Experience shows that this can help a person get better quicker and help avoid relapse or repeated hospitalization.

There are guidelines available to help mental health staff work effectively with families. **Supporting Families** branches and other family support agencies offer free services to help anyone affected by a relative's major mental illness. You can be referred to, or contact your local **Supporting Families** branch who will work alongside you and your family to understand your family member's illness and how best you can support them in their recovery. This service would include but is not limited to:

- Accurate information and education about mental illness
- Communication, problem solving skills and self advocacy skills
- Crisis planning
- Advocacy and liaison with services and agencies
- Family/whanau maintaining their own wellness

Your local **Supporting Families** family/whanau worker can also put you in touch with other families who have a loved one experiencing mental illness. Many families find it helps to share their challenges and talk things through with others who understand.

