



Mental Illness



What is Mental Illness?

Mental Illness is the term that refers collectively to all mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness, all of which can be triggered by a variety of causes: a particular situation or series of events, an illness, genetics, biochemical imbalances, or any combination of those factors. Above all, it's important to remember that there is help and hope for your loved one.

If you have a family member who's been diagnosed with a mental illness, you're probably wondering what you can do to help. Although new forms of therapy and medication make it possible for many individuals to lead full, independent lives, the support of family, friends and peers remains an essential element in the recovery process.

Encourage a *Dialogue for Recovery*

A key element in recovery is a productive, two-way communication between patient and doctor: the Mental Health Association calls this a Dialogue for Recovery. Encouraging your family member to foster this type of relationship with his or her team of healthcare professionals can make a big difference in helping your loved one to recover.

There are also many other ways you can help people cope with their disorder, get treatment and work toward recovery. In this brochure you will find some helpful tips for supporting someone close to you.

For more information on resources available in Genesee County call:

Mental Health Association
in Genesee County
25 Liberty Street
Batavia, NY 14020
(585)344-2611

Email: mhagenesee@2ki.net
on the web: www.gcmha.org

or
RAP

(Regional Action Phone, Inc.)
(585) 343-1212 or
1-800-359-5727

Navigating the Mental Health System in Genesee County: A Guide for Families

is also available free of charge through the Mental Health Association in Genesee County.

Artwork by: Peter Langen



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Support Strategies for when your loved one is diagnosed with a mental illness



Accept your feelings. You may find yourself denying the warning signs, worrying what other people will think due to stigma, or wondering what caused your loved one to become ill. Accept that these feelings are normal and common among families with a loved one who has mental illness.

Educate yourself. Learn about the diagnosis, symptoms and available treatments. The Mental Health Association, public libraries and the Internet are all good resources.

Be compassionate. Recognize that your family member or friend may feel scared and confused after receiving a diagnosis. Although some people are relieved to get diagnosed and actively seek treatment, it may feel devastating to others.

Practice “active listening.” Listen to your family member or friend and express your understanding back to them. Acknowledge the feelings he or she is experiencing and don’t discount them, even if you believe them to be symptoms of the illness.

Motivate. Encourage your loved one to learn about what treatments and services will promote recovery. Recognize that finding the right treatment or services can take time, and can involve a process of trial and error.

Understand the challenges of medication. Although treatments have improved tremendously in the past decade, they can also lead to side effects that can make your family member feel worse and want to stop taking the medicine. Encourage your loved one to speak immediately to his or her healthcare provider about any problems related to medications.

Understand that it’s not just about medication. Recovery from mental illness isn’t only a matter of “just staying on your medications.” Self-esteem, social support and a feeling of contributing to society are also essential elements of recovery and should be supported.

Offer practical help. Offer to drive or accompany your family member to medical and other appointments. And, if he or she wants you to, discuss the treatment, side effects or other issues with the doctor and treatment team.

Give respect. Always respect the individual’s need for and right to privacy. People with mental illnesses have the same right to be treated with dignity and respect as anyone else.

Establish a support network. Seek out your own support from family and friends. Self-help and support groups also provide an opportunity to talk with other people who are experiencing the same types of issues you are. They can listen and offer valuable advice.

Take time out. Schedule time for yourself to help you keep things in perspective. Making sure you pursue your own interests will help you have more patience and compassion toward your loved one. You can only help others when you are physically and emotionally healthy yourself. Also, make sure any other family members aren’t feeling ignored, and set aside quality time to spend together.

Maintain hope. There is hope for recovery, and with treatment, many people who have mental illnesses return to productive and fulfilling lives.

Advocate. If possible, and with the agreement of your loved one, help him or her find the resources he or she needs. For a copy of Navigating the Mental Health System in Genesee County: A Guide for Families, call:

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in Genesee County
at (585) 344-2611
Or visit us on the web:
www.gcmha.org**