

Why am I struggling with my loved one's mental illness?

If you find it difficult to come to terms with the challenges presented by your sibling's or parent's mental illness, you are not alone. Most people find that mental illness in a brother, sister or parent is a tragic event that changes everyone's life in many fundamental ways. Strange, unpredictable behaviors in a loved one can be devastating, and your own personal anxiety may increase as you struggle with each illness episode and worry about the future. It seems impossible at first, but most siblings and adult children find that over time they do gain the knowledge and skills to cope with the challenges effectively.

What can I do to better understand and cope with the situation?

The best starting place for learning to cope is to educate yourself; find out as much information as possible about mental illness by reading and by talking with others experiencing similar difficulties. NAMI has a variety of resources available for you: books, pamphlets, fact sheets and tapes available about different illnesses, treatments and issues you may have to deal with. The NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program is a 12-session course that teaches families about the illnesses, skills needed to navigate challenges and how to find support for the future. NAMI also provides support groups for family members of individuals living with mental illness. For information on support groups and classes contact your NAMI State Organization or NAMI Affiliate or call the NAMI HelpLine at (800) 950-6264.

Do you have any coping tips?

The following are some things to consider as you learn to live with mental illness:

1. Basic Principles

- You cannot cure a mental disorder for someone you love.
- No one is to blame for the one you love developing the disorder.
- Mental disorders affect more than the person who is ill; they affect everyone.
- Despite your best efforts, your loved one's symptoms will change for the better or sometimes for the worse; it is out of your control.
- It is important to learn to separate the disorder from the person you love.
- If you feel anger and resentment, direct that negative energy toward the illness, not the person that you love.
- Remember that it is quite often difficult for the person you love to accept their disorder. This is a process you too may contend with. Acceptance of the disorder by all concerned may be helpful, but it is not necessary.

2. Strategies and Realities

- Hallucinations and delusions have little or nothing to do with reality. It is not helpful to discuss them with your family member or attempt “talk them out of” such a belief.
- It is not realistic to think that it is possible to “fix” a biological disorder such as diabetes or depression with talk. However, addressing social complications is helpful.
- People you encounter will have a varying ability to discuss this with you. Unlike medical conditions which typically bring out sympathy, the community will likely be mixed in how they provide support for you and your loved one.
- Acknowledge the remarkable courage and strengths your loved one may show when dealing with a mental disorder.
- Grief issues for siblings are often common and powerful. Dealing with family responsibilities is another challenge to get support and advice on.
- After denial, sadness and anger over learning about your loved one’s mental disorder comes acceptance. Acceptance and understanding of the disorder itself yields compassion for the person you love.
- The symptoms presented by the disorder may change over time and circumstance. This can make expectations of your loved one a challenge – stay flexible.
- With your loved one’s permission, you may request information from their mental health treatment team to deepen your understanding of their condition.
- If your loved one isn’t getting what they need, assess your ability to engage their mental health provider to see how a case manager or other professional can help.
- It’s not personal, unusual or uncharacteristic behavior is a symptom of the disorder.
- Don’t be afraid to ask your sibling or parent if he or she is thinking about hurting him or herself. The possibility of suicide is a real concern, and asking about it will not give them the idea. See if they have a safety plan to address these concerns.

3. Self-Care and Balancing Your Needs with Those of Your Loved One

- Prioritize your own self-care. Good nutrition, rest, support groups, relationships, spiritual or religious support, exercise and hobbies are avenues to support self-care.
- You are not a paid professional. You are a sibling or child, not a parent or caseworker.
- The needs of the ill person do not have to come first; it’s not always possible.
- It is important to establish boundaries and to set clear limits for you.
- It is natural for you to experience a variety of emotions. You, not the person with the disorder, are responsible for your own feelings. Getting psychotherapy support can often be quite helpful for these experiences.
- You are not alone. Sharing your thoughts and feelings in a support group has been helpful and enlightening for many. NAMI has thousands of support groups across the nation. The shared experience found in support groups reduces isolation and stress.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., Darcy Gruttadaro and Teri Brister, May 2013