

Having a family member with a mental illness can be very stressful. Whether the ill person is a son, daughter, husband, wife, brother or sister, you will be affected by their illness too. A person with a psychiatric disorder often needs much love, help and support. At the same time, the problems, fears and behaviour of your ill relative may strain your patience and your ability to cope.

There are many different kinds of mental illness, and each has its own symptoms. During periods when your relative is ill, he/she may be demanding and disruptive, or extremely withdrawn and inactive. In fact, an ill person's behaviour may keep on changing because the symptoms may fluctuate.

Whether you suspect, or know for certain, that a member of your family has a psychiatric disorder, you will probably find that it helps to learn about the disorder.

## **WHAT CAUSES MENTAL ILLNESS?**

Mental illness has no single cause. In the past, parents were routinely blamed if their child developed a mental illness. More recently, there has been increasing medical evidence that many of the major mental illnesses involve biochemical imbalances in the body. This knowledge is helping to remove the burden of guilt and blame from parents' shoulders.

## **HOW IS A DIAGNOSIS MADE?**

Diagnosing a mental illness is not always a simple matter. A psychiatrist may take a long time to determine the nature of the illness, and sometimes, a different diagnosis may be made by another psychiatrist.

Since patients' medical records are confidential, doctors cannot tell the family directly what the diagnosis is. To avoid the

frustration of not knowing what is happening, encourage your ill relative to tell you about his/her diagnosis and treatment.

## **COPING WITH YOUR RELATIVE'S SYMPTOMS**

Much of the unusual behaviour associated with some mental illnesses is beyond the control of the person with the illness.

At times, your ill relative may embarrass you in front of friends and neighbours. Because it is difficult to talk about your relative's problems with people outside your immediate family, you may not offer an explanation. Many families, unfortunately, give up their own social lives when a relative becomes mentally ill because they are nervous about inviting people into their home.

While it takes courage to tell your friends and family about your relative's illness, it is not good to isolate yourself. Try to find ways to explain the illness and the treatment to others, and to talk about the discomfort you and other people feel as a result of your relative's behaviour.

Although your relative cannot "turn off" the symptoms, there are limits to the kind of behaviour you can deal with in your home. If your mentally ill relative is doing things which put him/her or anyone else in danger, you may have to refuse to let him/her continue to live with you at least until the dangerous behaviour changes.

## **HOW ARE MENTAL ILLNESSES TREATED?**

Treatment is different for each mental illness. People with schizophrenia are usually given medication as are people with depression, manic depression or anxiety disorders. In addition to medication, doctors may suggest individual psychotherapy (counselling) or group therapy. They may also refer the person to other community programs and services.

## **WHAT COMMUNITY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE FOR MENTALLY ILL PEOPLE?**

People with a serious mental illness may not develop the usual practical living skills in their teen or early adult years because the mental illness has made normal living very difficult.

To help these people cope with daily life and to live with a reasonable degree of independence, many organizations have developed community support programs. Some of these provide housing along with counselling and life-skills teaching. Vocational rehabilitation programs help people develop job skills. Other programs help people who are having problems developing social relationships.

## **WHAT ABOUT INCOME?**

Many families do not realize that their relative is entitled to social benefits if he/she cannot work because a mental illness. Even if an adult relative is living with you, you do not have to provide the sole financial support.

You should investigate whether your relative qualifies for Canada Pension Plan disability benefits or provincial welfare benefits – either regular welfare or a special allowance for disabled people.

## **SUPPORT FOR THE FAMILY**

Having a mentally ill member in your family can add an extra strain much of the time for the rest of the family. You may worry about how the person with the illness is going to behave: if he/she will become violent, verbally abusive or careless about safety and security. If the ill relative is living in your home, you may become depressed, anxious or angry yourself.

In many communities, there are self-help support groups for families of mentally ill people, which are set up by families in similar situations. It can be extremely helpful to share your burdens with others and to get more information about the illness and other community resources.

Another option is to consider getting a therapist for yourself to help you deal with the depression, anxiety or anger you may be feeling as a result of the stress of trying to support and care for a person with a mental illness.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO IN A CRISIS?

From time to time, your relative's symptoms may become severe. When this happens, it is important for him/her to see a psychiatrist right away. This can be easy if he/she agrees that help is needed. If your relative refuses to visit a doctor or to go to a hospital emergency room, you have a much more difficult situation on your hands. If all your efforts to persuade him/her to go for help fail, try to get someone else involved. If you think he/she is becoming dangerous to anyone, you can call the police and ask them to take him/her to the hospital.

Some communities have special psychiatric crisis programs. Find out, in advance, if this kind of service is available where you live.

### DO YOU NEED MORE INFORMATION?

There are many good books on mental illness, some of them are written for families. Check at your local library or bookstore. You can also talk to your relative's psychiatrist or social worker. While they won't always give you information about the treatment being provided, they can tell you more about the illness and the effects of medications.

If you need more information about community support programs for people with mental illness and their families, contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

Visit the CMHA website at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) today.

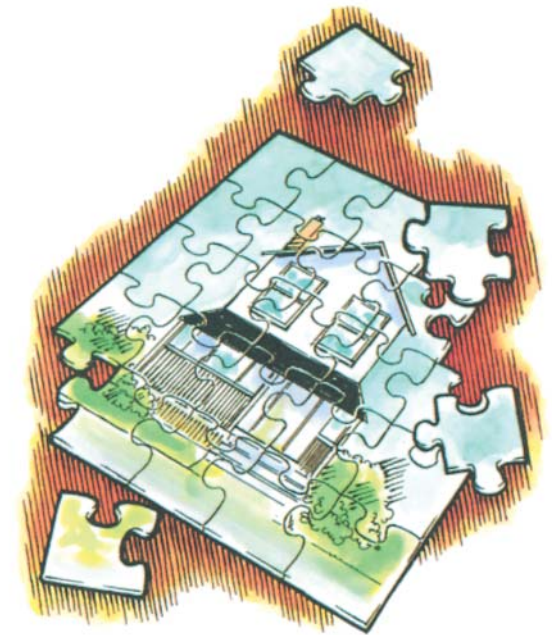
### MENTALLY HEALTHY PEOPLE IN A HEALTHY SOCIETY

Canadian Mental Health Association,  
York Region Branch  
Serving York Region and South Simcoe

905-853-8477 or 1-866-208-5509  
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## MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE