

Caring for someone with a mental illness *by Josie Padro*



In many ways, caring for someone with a mental illness is similar to caring for someone with a physical illness. The person with the illness and their caregiver must learn about the effects of the disease, how best to manage it, medications used to control it and more. There are appointments to attend and a whole host of professionals to meet.

One of the major differences faced by those dealing with mental health issues and their caregivers is stigma—the fear of mental illness or an avoidance of anyone who might be living with it. Possibly due to high profile cases in the media, those with mental illnesses can be seen as unpredictable or even dangerous.

Negative perceptions of mental illness can lead to discrimination when it comes to housing, employment and even health care. Because of these perceptions many people are reluctant to seek help, even though early treatment can often prevent more serious symptoms.

Physical health can also decline as the person is not always able to maintain a lifestyle that keeps them healthy.

Caregivers often provide support over many years as symptoms often begin in young adulthood or earlier. Over time, caregivers may have to deal with multiple health professionals and health authorities as the person they care for can often move from community to community.

A few facts

20 percent of Canadians will experience mental illness at some time in their lives.

Close to 50 percent of those who believe they have problems with anxiety or depression have never sought help.

Mental illness is the second leading cause of disability and premature death in Canada.

Source: Canadian Mental Health Association and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Another challenge faced by families is that, because of privacy laws, they may not be notified when their family member is admitted or discharged from hospital.

The Canadian Mental Health Association advises caregivers to have a plan in place to deal with times of crisis. The plan, written when the person is well, details what to do and who to contact should the person become unwell.

It may also be helpful to draw up an Advanced Care Plan which specifies which medical interventions the person wishes and which they do not.

The good news is that many people are able to recover from a mental illness and carry on with productive lives. Those who continue to experience symptoms are often able to manage their symptoms through a variety of ways, including therapy, medication and lifestyle.

What's vital is that caregivers look after their own health, both mental and physical:

- Join a support group.
- Ask for help.
- Stay in touch with friends and family.
- Try to make time, however brief, to do things you love, like listening to music, reading, painting.
- Stay physically healthy by going for regular medical and dental checkups.
- Exercise regularly.

It may seem impossible to do all these things, but ensuring your own health will enable you to be there, over the long term, for the person you care for.

Resources

Canadian Mental Health Association British Columbia Division www.cmha.bc.ca, 604-688-3234

North Shore Schizophrenia Society www.northshoreschizophrenia.org 604-926-0856

BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services Crisis line: 310-6789 www.bcmhsus.ca 604-875-2345 local 2010

Advanced Care Planning: Province of British Columbia www2.gov.bcv.ca

Living Systems Counselling: 604-926-5496 Services determined on a sliding scale. Located on the North Shore.