

# Coping with Mental Illness in the Family

■ by Beth Elgersma, MSW, LCSW



Talking with potential clients' family members about a loved one's mental health issues has given me some ideas that may be helpful to you as you think about how to help your loved one who is facing mental health concerns. Often people struggle for a long time before seeking professional help. As a therapist, I am concerned about continuing to spread the word that being proactive in seeking mental health treatment is usually a wise decision. What can you do if you suspect your loved one has some mental health needs?

First of all, love and accept them in their present situation. That may include spending time with them, listening to them, encouraging them, and discussing with them the possibility of getting some professional help. A call to our office may be a first step. Our front office can check which therapist may work out best for you. This may be based on the therapist's experience with the counseling concern, the geographical office that will work out best for the potential client, and the client's insurance. Note: We also have reduced-fee options for those without insurance.

After an appointment has been made, you may consider driving your loved one to their first appointment, or even attending the appointment with them if they are hesitant to come. Obviously, this must be acceptable to both the client and the therapist. Once they have a diagnosis, you may find it helpful to read some information on the diagnosis. Information is very helpful with diagnoses such as Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorders, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Phobias, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and others. When you have information about the diagnosis, you will have an idea whether it is the correct diagnosis, whether medication is usually recommended for that diagnosis, and whether there is improvement being made. There are many good books available. Some cover treatment methods for a particular diagnosis, and others cover several diagnoses. You can ask the therapist, or check our website for ideas. If the therapist recommends a medication evaluation, you may consider assisting your loved one in making an appointment with a psychiatrist, or perhaps starting with their primary care physician. If medication is recommended, it usually gives the client the possibility of a faster recovery. Generally, ongoing counseling is recommended to make some long-term changes in how the person thinks about their problems and/or their diagnosis, which results in a better prognosis, and more lasting changes in their coping abilities.

In summary, your support can make a difference in whether your loved one receives the appropriate help early in the process. I have seen many people go through needless suffering when professional help is available, and earlier intervention can make a big difference in their recovery.

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Beth enjoys working with individuals, couples, and families in our South Holland location.

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