

# Learning to Help Your Child Who Has a Mental Health Challenge

Having a child with a mental health condition can be a challenge, but there are ways to help make things easier. Begin by taking notice of your children's moods, behaviors and emotions. Early intervention, especially with signs of psychosis, is critical because mental health conditions often get worse without treatment.

Many conditions are cyclical and periods of strong symptoms may come and go. Symptoms aren't visible all the time. Children may also hide certain symptoms by saying and doing what they believe is expected of them.

## What to Do if You Notice Symptoms

If you think you notice symptoms, schedule an appointment with a licensed psychiatrist or psychologist as soon as you can, or if that is not possible, then with your pediatrician or primary care physician. Make sure that you provide your healthcare professional with as much detailed information as you can:

- Past mental health evaluations and other medical records
- Descriptions of symptoms, when they began, and whether they have changed over time
- Any medications or other medical treatments that your child is receiving
- Anything else that is requested or that you think might be valuable information

If a doctor, psychologist or counselor does not provide a diagnosis or referral to another professional, you should ask why and consider their reasoning. If you disagree, trust your instincts and seek a second opinion. It is often better to be cautious than to ignore a potentially serious problem.

If your child reports seeing or hearing things that are not there, without the influence of drugs or alcohol, then you should seek medical treatment immediately. This may be an episode of psychosis. Such episodes might also include: spontaneous violent behavior, denial of reality, nonsensical and paranoid claims, removal of clothing, reckless and dangerous behavior, or claims of invincibility and other special powers.

Even though there are a variety of treatment options available, it can be difficult to locate and secure the proper treatment. You can find directories of mental health professionals and treatment facilities through PsychologyToday and SAMHSA.

# How to Continue Helping Your Child

## Learn All that You Can

In addition to seeking help from healthcare professionals, you should educate yourself as much as possible about your child's mental health condition. NAMI Basics is an educational class that teaches parents and other family caregivers how to cope with their child's condition and manage their recovery. You can also find information about specific mental health conditions and treatment options on our website.

## Talk with Your Child's School

Check to be sure that your child is receiving appropriate care and services at school. Children with mental health conditions may struggle in school without assistance, leading to frustration and stress. Fortunately, the law requires that schools provide special services and accommodations to children with mental health conditions that interfere with their education. Learn more about how to acquire necessary educational services.

## Work with Your Child

You need to remain respectful and understanding of your child's feelings even if everything seems to be working against you. You should avoid getting angry at them for behaviors that are not under their control. This does not mean you can't set limits or impose discipline. What it does mean is that you must set your expectations in consideration of your child's mental health. This is often referred to as part of "finding a new normal."

Although it can be hard to accept, people who develop mental health conditions may never be the same as they were before. Expecting the same standards of behavior from prior to the onset of their mental health condition will only cause frustration and stress for everyone.

## How to Hold Your Family Together

When you have a child with mental illness, it is easy to let your concern for them grow to consume your life. Here are some things to remember:

1. **Take Care of Yourself.** While it is your responsibility to care for and support your child, it is also your responsibility to take care of yourself. You may have to adjust your priorities or your lifestyle, but you should avoid letting the challenges posed by your child's mental health condition make you neglect other important parts of your life.

In some cases, the stress of raising a child with a mental illness can contribute to the experience of mental health challenges by a parent. If you begin to feel that you are struggling with sadness or anxiety, do not hesitate to seek treatment for yourself. Caring for your own mental well-being will serve as a model for your child to follow, and ensure that you are healthy and able to care for your child.

2. **Take Care of Your Family.** Remember that if you have other children, they may resent being pushed to the side if all the attention is placed on their sibling's mental health challenges. Make sure that they understand what their sibling is going through, and that you spend time with each

of them. Keeping a happy and balanced family can be very helpful in reducing stress levels for everyone, which can help alleviate symptoms of mental illness.

3. Get Your Family Involved. If you live with a partner or spouse, or have other children, try to get them involved in being an advocate for your child. You may find that you deal with challenges and obstacles differently than them, but you should find ways to combine strengths to overcome any weaknesses. Be ready to compromise, listen and be open to new ideas.

It is possible you may discover that some members of your family have little interest in supporting you and your child in dealing with challenges posed by your child's mental health condition. It is also possible that a spouse or significant other may be a negative influence on your child. They may demand discipline for behaviors your child cannot control, deny that there is anything wrong or insist upon an irrational course of action.

Helping to raise a child who has a mental health condition can be stressful, and it is unrealistic to assume that anyone, yourself included, will always react in an ideal way. However, you must also realize that it is your responsibility to protect your child, even from others that you care about.

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