

# How to help someone who is mentally ill

By Sandi Karr

When a family member has a cold, we try to make them more comfortable. If a loved had symptoms of a heart attack, we would get them to medical care. Yet many of us hesitate to help friends and family who have mental illnesses – one of the most common types of disease in the United States.

More than 50% of us will be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in our lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC reports that one in five Americans will experience a mental illness during any given year and that one in 25 lives with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or major depression.

Don't be afraid to approach a person who has a mental illness out of fear of offending that person. People who have support from family and friends are more likely to get treatment. Those who get treatment are more likely to recover their mental health. Just one caring person can make a positive difference.

First, educate yourself so you can more effectively offer hope to a person who is struggling. Let that person know there is effective treatment to recover. Learn about resources in your community – clinics, hospitals, support groups and the Community Crisis Center.

To learn more, visit:

- The National Alliance on Mental Illness at [nami.org](http://nami.org)
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration information site at [MentalHealth.gov](http://MentalHealth.gov)

Because stigma remains a barrier to getting mental healthcare, approach the person you are concerned about with respect. Tell the person “you are not alone.” Be sensitive to the person's need for privacy. Pick an appropriate time and place to ask how they are feeling. Discuss the topic when the person feels safe and comfortable.

If you think a person may be suicidal, ask if they have thought of hurting themselves. Asking the question won't make them more likely to hurt themselves. Ask directly: Have you had thoughts of harming yourself?

## **Not sure what to do? Call 988 Lifeline**

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 by texting or calling 988. Friends or family members can also call the lifeline for support so they can help the person struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Stigma can extend to how we view mental healthcare professionals. People may be more willing to see a family doctor than to visit a psychiatrist or professional counselor. The individual's primary care

provider – physician, nurse practitioner or physician assistant – can be the best person to start with on the recovery journey.

With education, we understand that mental illness isn't a character flaw or weakness. Mental illnesses can be caused by many factors and people can get better with appropriate treatment.

When you are trying to support a person who has a mental illness, be sure to take good care of yourself. You have to stay well to help others. It's like the airline passenger safety message: Put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting others.

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