

Supporting a loved one in recovery for a mental health condition

Suicide is a global phenomenon that affects people in all regions of the world. In fact, it is one of the leading causes of death worldwide and accounts for about one in every 100 deaths.¹ And for each suicide, there are more than 20 suicide attempts.²

Mental health disorders are often linked to a person's suicidal thoughts or attempts. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 280 million people of all ages have depression, which is the leading cause of disability worldwide and a disorder that can lead to suicide.³ Depression and anxiety (also a risk for suicide) went up by more than 25% in the first year of the pandemic alone.⁴

But even though nearly one billion people globally have a mental health condition, seeking and receiving care too often poses a significant hurdle.⁵ Globally, relatively few people have access to quality mental health services. For example:

- The gaps in service coverage for depression are wide across all countries. Even in high-income countries, only one third of people with depression receive formal mental health care, and minimally adequate treatment for depression is estimated to range from 23% in high-income countries to 3% in low- and lower-middle-income countries.⁶
- Of those with psychosis worldwide, 71% do not receive mental health services.⁷
- In low- and middle-income countries, more than 75% of people with mental and substance-use disorders receive no treatment for their condition.⁸

Stigma is another significant barrier. In fact, stigma, discrimination and human rights violations against people with mental health conditions are widespread in communities and care systems everywhere, and 20 countries still criminalise attempted suicide.⁹

Yet, there is hope. International organisations such as the WHO and UNICEF, and many organisations on national levels, are raising awareness of mental health and wellness, and working to put more resources into place. Progress is being made.

In any case, with the right care plan and adherence to it, most people diagnosed with a mental illness can successfully function and live with their condition. A major contributing factor in their success is having the understanding and support of people who care about them.

Here are some ways that you can do your part to help the people you care about with mental health conditions on their recovery journey:

Keep a 'big picture' perspective

Recognise that mental health conditions can be situational (i.e. occurring during a time of uncertainty, crisis or life-altering event) or chronic (i.e. a disorder that persists for three months or more). Some people live with chronic mental illness throughout their lives. Also, an untreated situational mental health condition can become chronic mental illness.

In either case, mental health affects a person's emotional, psychological and social wellbeing, and affects how they think, feel and act. It also affects how a person functions day to day, handles stress, relates to others and makes decisions.¹⁰ As such, your loved one may act and/or react in ways that are difficult for you to understand or handle. If they are not already in care, encourage them to get help.

If available, they can consult with a professional mental health and/or medical provider who can help them with treatment. They also can contact an advocacy or support group organisation that can help connect them to available resources or services.

Be patient with recovery

Determining the right diagnosis and treatment plan to serve the unique needs of an individual takes time – there is no 'one size fits all', including for people with the same condition. A complete evaluation conducted by a qualified mental health care provider is important, as many different conditions can display similar signs or symptoms. In addition, it is important for the person to receive a full medical evaluation by a healthcare provider to ensure that the symptoms are not related to a medical condition.

Depending on the mental health condition and the severity of the condition, the treatment plan will usually include self-help, psychotherapy, medication or a combination of remedies. To gain a better, fundamental understanding of the condition and what to expect, consider doing some background research using credible clinical sources and resources.

For your part, do your best to encourage your loved one to stick with the treatment plan.

Understand that the recovery journey is an ongoing process with improvements and setbacks. Implementing the treatment plan will take some time, as the person goes through therapy to learn how to cope with and manage their condition, gets accustomed to their new way of being and also adjusts to any medication being used. All you can do is your best for your loved one and yourself. Rest assured, your support does make a difference.

Be interested and respectful

Often, when someone learns that they have a mental illness – whether situational or chronic – their self-esteem gets damaged and needs to be nurtured. Check in with them and ask them how they're doing. This will help them know that you care about them. If they don't want to talk about it, let them know that that's OK and you are there for them if and when they do.

If they do share, listen without judgment. Prepare yourself that it may be difficult for you to grasp what they're going through, and that they may make decisions about their treatment and recovery process that are different from ones you believe you would make in their situation. In other words, avoid stepping in with unsolicited advice or overstepping by trying to redirect their decisions or solve their problems.

Try to remember that you are there to help them get through this, but not there to dictate their choices. Keep in mind, for the best treatment outcomes, it is important for the person to feel invested in and in control of (to the best of their ability) their own decisions and recovery process.



Focus on the person

Depending on the condition and its severity, the person that you care about may not fully grasp how you're trying to help them or what you're going through. Still, do your very best to separate the condition from the person. While your loved one is learning to cope with having a mental illness, they themselves are not the mental illness. Do your best to be present and nurture their sense of self and personhood. Look for ways to be present and supportive without focusing on the condition, such as inviting them to go for a walk or to share a meal or something else that you can both enjoy while spending time together. Also, let them feel your sense of personhood and camaraderie. Talk to them about things going on in your life, just as you would with any other friend or person you care about.



Take care of yourself

If you are the primary caregiver or very much relied on to be involved in the person's recovery process, make sure that you take care of yourself, too. Depending on your role, this can mean taking time for yourself, getting a good night's sleep, eating nutritious foods and being physically active. If you are the person's primary caregiver, think of ways that you can help them become more self-sufficient, such as by having them set a calendar reminder or alarm for their next therapy appointment or to take their medication. Also, if and when possible, share the responsibility with other family members or support network persons.



Find and keep reasons for hope

Mental health conditions can sometimes feel discouraging or overwhelming; maintaining hope is a critical part of the recovery process. For you and your loved one, it can be helpful to join a support group and hear the recovery stories of others. Doing so can help give you insight into what to expect and how others have coped with similar experiences during their recovery journeys.

Along this recovery journey, rest assured that there is hope. With the right care plan and adherence to it, most people diagnosed with a mental illness can successfully learn to live with their condition.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

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