

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Mental Illness in the Family



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Serious mental illness affects all the people who love and surround the ill person. If the onset of illness is recent, family relationships could still be in a state of change. Some members might need to assume new care-giving

responsibilities for the ill individual. Often others must take on the family role usually filled by that person. Whether the ill individual is a parent, grandparent, sibling, or close relative, these changes can be confusing and upsetting to young children and adolescents.

The focus within the family will most likely change. Energies once spent nurturing younger children or building family bonds may now be focused on the ill family member. This shift can be a period of extreme stress for everyone. Even when the illness is long standing, it may still consume much of the family focus.

These changes can seem overwhelming to younger family members, especially if:

- living arrangements and other daily routines are being upset;
- other caregivers are stepping in for an ill or absent parent; and/or
- important relationships with siblings or grandparents are disrupted.

In these situations, children need age appropriate information and guidance to understand what is happening to their loved one and family.

Guilt

Nearly all relatives of people with mental illness feel guilty, at some point, about their relative's or their own situation. Although it may never completely disappear, the feeling can be significantly reduced.

Causes of Guilt:

- blaming yourself or regretting your feelings (especially anger), thoughts, or actions regarding your ill relative;

- feeling bad about having a better life than your relative does (survivor guilt); and/or
- society's ostracism of families who have a relative with a mental illness.

Effects of Guilt:

- depression; lack of energy for the present
- dwelling on the past;
- diminished self-confidence and self-worth;
- less effectiveness in solving problems and achieving goals;
- acting like a martyr, in an effort to make up for past sins;
- being overprotective, which leads to your relative's feeling more helpless and dependent; and/or
- diminished quality of your life.

How to Deal with Guilt:

- Develop more rational and less painful ways of thinking about the situation.
- Acknowledge and express your guilt with an understanding listener.
- Examine the beliefs underlying your guilt. (For example: "I should have noticed the signs sooner and done something to prevent it.") Counteract these false beliefs, using the information you have learned about the causes and course of mental illness.
- Try not to dwell on the past.
- Focus on how you may improve the present and the future for yourself and your ill relative.
- Remind yourself that you deserve a good life even if your relative may not be fortunate enough to have one.

For more information on other mental health topics, go to our website at www.humanservicescenter.net



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