

Supporting someone with a mental illness

For carers, friends and relatives

If you support someone with a mental illness you may face practical, financial and emotional problems from time to time. This factsheet looks at tips and suggestions to help you support someone.



KEY POINTS

- There is no 'one size fits all' way to support someone with a mental illness. How you care for someone will depend on you and the person you care for.
- It can help to understand the diagnosis and how it affects the person you care for. Setting out roles and responsibilities together can be useful.
- Be patient. Getting better can take time.
- The person you care for may have very challenging and complex behaviour. This can cause a lot of stress between you and the person you are caring for. There will be help available, however.
- Encourage the person you are supporting to be independent and take part in everyday activities.
- If you live together setting out house rules can help.
- Make a crisis or emergency plan.
- Remember that you are not to blame if things get difficult.
- Make sure you look after yourself and your own wellbeing.

This factsheet covers:

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2. [Looking after yourself](#)
3. [How do I give emotional support to the person I care for?](#)
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There is no single, right or wrong way to support someone with a mental illness. How you support someone will depend on you and the person you care for. The following sections contain tips and suggestions which you might find useful.

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1. Learning about the illness

Learn about the illness, if the person you care for has been given a diagnosis. This can help you understand how it affects them and might make you feel more confident caring for them.

You can learn about the illness by going to carers groups or services. There you can meet others who may have been through similar experiences and get support and information. Most areas have carers groups or services. You can search online or contact local social services to enquire about different groups.

You can also learn about mental illnesses on trusted websites. Rethink Mental Illness, Mind and the NHS have reliable information about mental health conditions. You could also buy, or borrow a book about the condition from the library.

Talk to the person you are supporting about what symptoms they get when they are becoming unwell. This might help you recognise if they are becoming unwell in the future. You should talk about what medication they are taking, when they take it and if they have any side effects.

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2. Looking after yourself

Emotionally

If you care for someone with a mental illness, you might find it stressful and difficult. It is important to look after your own health and wellbeing. You can try some of the following things to help look after yourself.

- Understand what you can and can't do as a carer.
- Understand what the person you care for can and can't do.
- Give yourself time to do things you want to do, such as a hobby or leisure activity.
- Try and keep physically active and have a well balanced diet.
- Keep an eye on your own health and know when you need a break.
- Join a carers or support group for peer support. You can also use an emotional support service if you are unable to get to meetings. If you are feeling low or stressed, talk to your doctor about this - perhaps counselling, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or other treatment will help you.

Practically

You may have to organise appointments or meetings, if you are supporting someone with a mental illness. There are some things you can do to help with this.

- Keep a diary for their appointments and meetings.
- Keep a diary of medications and times to be taken, checking them off as they are taken.
- Know what benefits you may be entitled to.
- Ask your local council's social services department for a 'carer's assessment'. This assessment will see if you need any services to help you support someone.
- See if there are any local services that can help you with practical support. Your local authority may have an updated list of local carers groups and services. Check their website or call them.

You can find more information about '**Carers assessments**' at www.rethink.org . Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy.

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3. How do I give emotional support to the person I care for?

Offer to listen to the person you are supporting. Listening to someone does not mean you have to say much back to them. Sometimes they may find it helpful to just talk to you about their problems, and to know that you are there to listen.

Do not be afraid to ask them questions about how they are feeling, and listen to their answers. If they are not feeling great, ask if you can do anything to help. Make sure you do not take on too much or that they aren't overwhelmed.

4. How do I encourage the person I care for to get treatment?

You might find that the person you are supporting doesn't want to get treatment. This might be because they:

- do not think they need help and things will get better on their own,
- are so unwell they do not think treatment will work,
- do not understand they are unwell,
- are scared of what will happen to them if they tell their doctor how they feel,
- are worried what other people might think,
- are worried it will affect their job or studies, and
- feel hopeless.

If the person you care for doesn't want to get help, it can be very frustrating. Nobody can force someone else to get medical treatment unless they are in hospital under the Mental Health Act (sometimes called being 'sectioned'), or on a 'community treatment order'.

If you want more information about things you can say to the person you are caring for, to try and get them to see a doctor you can look at our **"Persuading someone to speak to their GP"** document. You can find this document at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy.

It may help if you offer to go to an appointment with them and support them during that appointment. If they don't want you to go into the appointment you could offer to wait outside the surgery or in the waiting area.

If someone you care for does not want to get help you could try to:

- talk to them about how they feel,
- ask them why they do not want to get help,
- explain that you are worried because they seem upset, down, stressed or worried and you want to try help them,
- explain what kind of help they could get, and
- offer to help them talk to their doctor or offer to talk to their doctor before their appointment.

If the person you are supporting has delusional or paranoid beliefs, they may feel that other people such as GPs are plotting against them. This is a difficult situation to manage, and is common in psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia. It can make things worse if you try to directly challenge the delusions. This might be by saying trying to explain the doctor is there to help. In the short term you may wish to concentrate on other ways of making sure the person is safe and healthy, and perhaps ask for help from social services.

Some people might refuse to get help even if you try to support them. It is important not to give up and to stay hopeful - it might take a while before they get help.

Go to www.rethink.org for information on these topics.

- Worried about someone's mental health?
- Responding to unusual behaviours
- Getting help in a crisis

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy.

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5. How can I help the person I care for stay independent?

When you care for someone they can become very dependent on you. Over time the person you care for can rely on you for things they could do themselves. Think about giving them more chances to make decisions and do things for themselves. Over time they may become more comfortable making decisions, which may take some of the pressure off you.

You can try the following.

- Set up some boundaries. You do this by deciding how much you can do and how much you want to do. Talk to the person you care for and tell them what you have decided. Remember, once you set up these boundaries it is important to stick to them.
- Talk about the skills the person you care for needs to focus on and agree goals. You can agree to show them how to do something and help them with it for a while until they are confident to do it alone. An example of this might be doing their own laundry or going to the shops.¹
- The person you care for may have support from a Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) or other mental health services. You could talk to their 'care coordinator' about their care plan. You can ask if they are doing anything to help them develop independent living skills. If the person is living on their own you could ask about getting help from an occupational therapist or floating support.
- You can encourage the person you support to use a personal budget to pay for services that could improve their day to day life. A personal budget is when social services assess their social care needs. They are then given money which they can choose to spend on services they need. Types of services could include computer classes or a gym membership. Choosing their own service can improve how they feel about themselves. Some services can also improve confidence and help to establish a routine.

You can find more information about '**Social Care – Care and support planning**' at www.rethink.org . Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy.

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6. How do I encourage the person I care for to eat well and keep active?

Diet, exercise and staying active are important for everyone. Staying active, if you have a mental illness can be especially important. It can help improve mood and can help with some of the side effects that medication causes. You could try to invite the person you care to go for a walk, swim or to the gym. It can be helpful for you as well to have a routine of getting out and about.

If the person you care for can't leave the house you can ask them to do cleaning around the house. They can help prepare for meals or do home exercises. You can get free exercises on the internet or borrow DVDs from your local library. They may not want to do these and find them boring, but it is important to have some routine and responsibilities during the day.

An unbalanced diet or eating too much or not enough can make getting better harder. You can ask your GP for a healthy diet plan which gives tips and recipe ideas to try out.

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7. How can I support someone in the home?

If you live with someone you care for, you might find some of their behaviour difficult or challenging. They might stay in bed for long periods of the day, not wash regularly, smoke a lot or not take their medication. Setting out household rules that everyone agrees to can help. It can be hard to get this to work at first but it is important to not give up.

Some ideas could be that everyone:

- has to be out of bed by a certain time, for example 9.30am during the week and 11am on the weekend,
- must wash at least twice a week,
- is responsible for planning, shopping and preparing for meals,
- has to clean up after themselves, and
- has to do their own laundry and clean their room.

Everyone in the household should sign up to the agreements. You need to think about what will happen if people don't follow the rules. It is important to stay calm but firm when you put the rules into effect and try to prevent arguments.²

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8. How can I help someone manage work and money?

Some people with mental illnesses will find it difficult to manage their money. For example, when someone with bipolar disorder has a manic episode, they may spend their weekly budget in one day. If someone cannot control their own money, you might want to think about ways to help them.

You could help someone manage their own money by:

- creating a weekly budget,
- planning what bills need to be paid using a schedule, and
- talking to a money advice service for further tips.

Having some responsibility outside of the house can be helpful. The person you care for might want to find paid or voluntary work. There are services that help people with mental illnesses get back into work and do voluntary work. Unfortunately these services are not available across all of the UK.

Organisations such as Remploy and Shaw Trust may be able to help.

You can find more information on www.rethink.org about:

- Options for dealing with someone else's financial affairs
- Work and mental illness

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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9. How can I deal with crisis situations?

It is important to plan for crisis situations, so that you will know who to contact in an emergency. Make a personal plan which has information about signs that a crisis might happen and what you can do if it does. There is a sample plan at the end of this factsheet. The sample plan is just a guide about what information to have on your plan. If the person you care for has a crisis plan from their mental health team it should be the first one you follow in a crisis.

You can find more information about '**Getting Help in a Crisis**' at www.rethink.org . Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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10. How can I deal with difficult behaviour?

When supporting someone, you might find some of the things they do difficult to deal with. The person you care for may:

- misuse drugs or alcohol,

- be aggressive towards yourself or other people,
- self-harm, and
- be sexually inappropriate.

Trying to manage difficult behaviour can cause stress on your relationship with the person you are supporting. Depending on the difficult behaviour you could try:

- having an agreement about using alcohol - when they can use it, what type of alcohol and how much,
- setting up rules about using drugs in the house,
- having clear rules about what happens if there is any aggressive or harmful behaviour, such as paying for any damage done or calling the police,
- learning to spot signs that someone might self-harm and trying to find ways to stop it, and
- taking some time away from each other -go for a walk or go to separate rooms for some space.

If the person you care for has complex mental health needs, you can always ask their mental health team for some specific advice about how to support them. You can talk about the things you have tried and what you think is not working. Mental health professionals will have experience of managing challenging behaviour and you can think through some things which might work.

You can find out more about:

- Responding to unusual behaviour
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health

at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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11. How do I help someone who is suicidal?

If the person you are supporting is feeling suicidal you can try some of the following things.

- Ask them about how they are feeling and listen
- Ask how you can help
- Take note of any plans they might have
- Be understanding of their situation
- Ask them about things that are stopping them from acting on suicidal thoughts. You might be able to find some positive things for them to focus on
- Make a plan of how they can keep safe

- Call 999 and ask for an ambulance or take them to the accident and emergency department (A&E) if you are very worried or they have tried to take their own life

You can find out more about:

- Suicidal thoughts – how to support someone
- Getting help in a crisis

at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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Carers UK

Carers UK run an advice line, online support carers groups throughout the UK.

Telephone: 0808 808 7777

Address: 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX

Email: info@carersuk.org

Website: www.carersuk.org/

GOV.UK

This is a website where you can find government services and information. The link below has information on many issues related to caring for someone, including financial affairs and carers' rights.

Website: www.gov.uk/browse/disabilities/carers

Carers Trust

This is a charity which was formed by joining The Princess Royal Trust for Carers and Crossroad Care. Their website gives practical advice about caring for someone.

Telephone: 0844 800 4361

Address: 32–36 Loman Street, London, SE1 0EH

Email: support@carers.org

Website: www.carers.org/

Your local council may keep a directory of local carers groups and services in your area.



¹ K. T. Mueser & S. Gingerich. *The Complete Family Guide to Schizophrenia: Helping Your Loved One Get the Most Out of Life*. London, UK: The Guilford Press; 2006.

² As note 1 pages 245-250

APPENDIX
EXAMPLE OF A BASIC EMERGENCY PLAN

This plan is designed to provide your carers, friends and relatives with ideas about how to make a crisis plan. This could provide you with the support you need, if you are in danger of going into crisis. .

What could happen	What to do	Who to contact
X shows signs of self-harm	Call Care Coordinator - day Call crisis team number - night	Miss T care coordinator (phone number) Mr S at the crisis team (phone number)
X tries to overdose	Call 999	Emergency services 999
X appears angry at me	Try to calm them down Get to safe place if violent	My sister, P, on (phone number)

Signs of relapse:

More delusional, is having episodes of uncontrolled anger, thinks that people are out to get him, is confused when talking, seems very quiet, doesn't speak very much, isn't sleeping much – stays up writing letters, is not taking all of their medication

What to do when there are signs of relapse:

Tell the doctor my concerns, ask X if he thinks that he should see a doctor, tell my family my concerns, ring crisis team or 999 in emergency.

Crisis Signs

May try to seriously self-harm or overdose, X starts going out by himself at night

Details of current medication to give to staff:

Clozapine 400mg

Previous treatments:

Olanzapine 2006-2008, Risperidone 2008-2010, Clozapine from 2010

Contacts:

X's crisis team – worker's name is Mr S – (phone number)

Emergency services – 999

X's GP surgery – GP's name is Mrs L – (phone number)

X's CMHT – Care coordinator is Miss T – (phone number)

People I can speak to if I need to:

Religious Leader

Friends

Relatives

My doctor

Local Support Group

Helpline numbers and Samaritans

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Last updated July 2016

Next update July 2019

Version 3

This factsheet is available
in large print.



Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
PO Box 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Leading the way to a better
quality of life for everyone
affected by severe mental illness.

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on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org

 [facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)

 twitter.com/rethink_

 www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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