

Supporting Your Mentally Ill Sibling

By Kim Nobles

Yes, I know. You don't want to support that difficult brother or sister, you just want them to change their behaviour. They disrupt family life, and it seems they get an inordinate amount of attention. Reality is that you must also do some changing -it may take years for your sibling to progress to a point when 'normal' social interaction is possible, but if you're willing, you can play a role in making that happen.

When illness is new and severe, you both need support! You need to learn all you can about the illness. You need to talk with others facing the same challenge. Therapy can be a big help if it is affordable. NAMI San Mateo County (NA MISMC) Family-to-Family classes are free and offer education and support. NAMI SMC also offers support groups, listed on page five of this newsletter. I went to the NAMI SMC office to pick up some material, and quickly discovered that by volunteering there, I could learn, share and lend a compassionate ear to callers. All of the above have served me and my mentally ill brother well.

I encourage you to take advantage of the resources available to you. Eventually, resentment and anger are harmful. They're best used as catalysts, as energy moving you to action and understanding and healing.



NAMI San Mateo County

NAMI San Mateo County
1730 So Amphlett Blvd #308
San Mateo, CA 94402

namisanmateo.org
650-638-0800

Affiliated with NAMI California and NAMI National

National Alliance on Mental Illness
NAMI
San Mateo County

How to Help a Friend With a Mental Illness

National Alliance
on Mental Illness
San Mateo County

For Information please call:
(650) 638-0800

Or email:
nami@namisanmateo.org

How to Help a Friend With a Mental Illness

By Katie Medlock, 3/18/16

Whether you know it or not, there are people in your life who are struggling with (or have struggled with) mental illness. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in four adults experience it within a given year. The term itself is so often associated with startling imagery and uninformed stereotypes that many of us do not have an accurate understanding of what people actually go through, let alone how to help.

Being able to be a supportive presence in the life of someone dealing with their illness does not require any special skills, but rather tapping into some of the fundamental abilities we all have, but just may not use very well or often. Here is a good start to helping a friend with mental illness.

1. Listen to what they are saying - Seems basic, right? Listening skills are some of our best tools in creating strong and healthy relationships with all of the people in our lives. We all have a need to be heard, yet sometimes it can be difficult to offer this opportunity for others. If a friend comes to you to talk about what they are going through, make sure you eliminate all distractions and really try to focus on understanding what they are expressing. Forget about planning what to say next and ignore the fear of saying something 'wrong'-these all get in the way of truly hearing what is being said to us.

2. Validate what they are feeling - So, how do you respond when someone is sharing their difficult experiences? It is likely that what they are sharing with you is difficult because society has stigmatized their experiences as bizarre or even not real. If a friend tells you they have been isolating themselves, they find it hard to leave their home or they have suspicions about people that sound odd search for the emotion they are describing and validate it. They might be feeling sad, frightened, confused, worried or even numb. The fact that someone can understand

had others tell them what needs to be done to "get better"--everything from family suggestions to involuntary hospitalization can feel like the person's ability to identify what they need is being taken away. Even if your friend says they do not know what they need, the question still must be asked so they are very much a part of their recovery.

4. Educate yourself about their experiences - The most important way to do this is to interact directly with your friend (see step number one) to understand their individual experiences. Yet, if someone is struggling with depression, for example, gather more information about the diagnosis itself to get a grasp on the facts and to challenge any lingering misinformation or stereotypes picked up from others. NAMI, the National Institute of Mental Health and the American Psychiatric Association offer a database of information about various disorders and how friends and family can help. Choices in Recovery and Mental Health Channel offer additional resources, newsletters, fact sheets and even video series highlighting people living with mental illness.

5. Keep being a friend - Something important to remember is that your friend is still the same person you know and love, even if you learn they are struggling with an illness. Many people find themselves worried about how to act or what to do differently, yet this hyper-awareness can sometimes be detrimental to the core of your connection with the person. Just as if you were to learn a friend is dealing with a physical illness, the kind of friend you are does not change. Follow-up with your friend. Respect their space if they need it. Spend more time together if that is what they prefer. Keep doing the things that keep your friendship strong.

With anyone in recovery for mental illness, some risks face them which may not face others. If you suspect your friend is feeling suicidal or is having difficulty caring for themselves due to their symptoms, seek guidance from trusted professionals. Calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to