

General Recovery - Tips for Living with a Mentally Ill Family Member

If you have a family member that struggles with symptoms of mental illness, here is some information designed to bring greater understanding:

Because they are always coping with mental and emotional stress related to anxiety and/or a depressed mood, persons coping with mental illness do well when they follow a routine or pre-planned schedule. They respond poorly to frequent changes in plans or spontaneous activities. They become easily overstimulated in crowds, at noisy parties, or other social events, and may become agitated, get a stomach ache, or even lose their appetites. Thus, they are more comfortable with one-on-one interactions. They need space between events to calm down and transition to a new activity. Because they have to spend much of their energy maintaining their cool and trying to think of conversation, etc., they do not have much mental stamina left over for planning or reasoning through quick adjustments to schedule changes. For this same reason, they have difficulty planning ahead for most anything and may appear disorganized, forgetful, and self-focused to others. These cognitive problems often impact their occupational success.

When a mentally ill person becomes agitated, he/she needs space and time to calm down. When upset, mentally ill individuals respond poorly to questions and advice, but rather need permission to leave the situation or take a break in face-saving way. Mentally ill persons are most likely to become overwhelmed in situations wherein they have been taken out of their routine, have lost sleep, have had many changes of plan or too many activities within a given time period (without down time), or wherein they do not feel socially able to handle themselves well. It is a good idea to check-in with the mentally ill person if you see that they are becoming anxious or agitated while they are with you, and ask them what they need. This may cue them to ask for space/time, rest, or otherwise help themselves to calm down.

With all of this said, a mental illness is not an excuse for your loved one. For example, because symptoms of mental illness and their related medications can all interfere with planning, organization, and memory skills, I repeatedly advise my clients to carry a day-planner or to put all of their events in their telephones with programmed alerts/reminders. Similarly, because mentally ill persons are easily overwhelmed in social situations, it is their responsibility to leave or take a break when agitated (or stay home from a given event). Further, it is the mentally ill individual's responsibility to take their medications, get enough sleep, and seek help when needed (although family members' advice is often helpful in this regard, as these individuals have difficulty assessing the severity of their own situation at times). Finally, it is the responsibility of the mentally ill individual to receive feedback from family members about how his/her

illness and behavior are impacting them and do his/her best to make appropriate changes in order to maintain good relationships with others.