

Caring for someone with a mental illness

Are you a carer?

Are you helping someone with a mental health condition or illness? If so, you might be called this person's carer.

You might spend time with the person and listen to their concerns. Perhaps you look after them full time at home. Maybe you're there when they have to go into hospital.

If you support someone with mental illness, you are playing an important role in their recovery.

You know how they normally act and which treatments work for them. You can answer questions if they become unwell.

Every caring relationship is unique. But there are some common issues that carers of someone with a mental illness will go through.

Help them take the first step

If you're close to someone who has symptoms of mental illness, encourage them to seek help.

If you think they're avoiding treatment, try talking to them about getting help for a physical symptom (e.g. not sleeping well, not having much energy).

➤ Mental illness: first steps to get help
yourhealthinmind.org/first

➤ Helping a suicidal person
yourhealthinmind.org/helping

Dealing with diagnosis

A diagnosis is made after a thorough assessment of a person's physical and mental health.

A diagnosis is just an agreed name for a certain set of symptoms. A diagnosis allows doctors to plan treatment and let you know what you should expect.

A diagnosis can change over time. It does not define the person.

If the person you're caring for has been diagnosed with a mental illness, you might need to discuss with the person:

- the meaning of the diagnosis
- how much care and ongoing support they think they need
- what is realistic for both of you.

A diagnosis might make you feel relieved. Or you might feel worried or stressed about what this means for the person you are supporting and yourself.

➤ Recommended mental health support services
yourhealthinmind.org/support

Partner with doctors

Psychiatrists, GPs and other doctors value carers as an essential part of mental health care.

If the person you care for agrees, you can:

- go to appointments with them
- talk about treatment and medications with the doctor
- find out general information about their illness from the doctor
- find out how you can support them at home.

“Stay with the same clinicians if you are happy with them. This will avoid having to tell the same story over and over.”

Sharon, South Australia

The doctor should:

- provide you with information on your role and rights as a carer
- explain what they can (and can't) talk about with you
- answer any questions you have
- refer you to carer support services if you need them.

You might have questions like:

- What should I look out for?
- When is it an emergency – and is there a number I can call?
- Who is the treating doctor?
- If the person needs to go to hospital, how long will they be there for?
- What plans are there for discharge?
- Why have you chosen this treatment? Are there any other options?
- What medications have been prescribed, and when should they be taken?
- What side effects should I be aware of?
- What help and supports can the hospital or health service provide?

In some states of Australia you can ask the person you support to fill in a 'Nominated Carer Form'. This tells doctors who to speak to if the person is very unwell. Ask your doctor where you can get the form.

Keep track of medications

Mental illness is often treated with medication.

These medications can help reduce a person's symptoms. Medication usually has to be taken every day at the same time to work best.

Read the printed information sheet that comes with the medication. This has details about how to take the medication and what the side effects might be.

The person may be given their medications in a pre-packed set (for example, a Webster-pak). In this case, the information sheet might be removed.

If so, you can find out full details of all medications on the Australian Government NPS Medicinewise or Medsafe New Zealand websites.

➤ NPS Medicinewise

nps.org.au

➤ Medsafe New Zealand

medsafe.govt.nz

How you can help with medication:

- Keep track of the medications the person is taking, for both their physical and mental health.
- Take side effects seriously.
- If the person's medication is changed, keep a close eye on their mood and behaviour.
- Know that it can be dangerous to combine medications, use alcohol or other drugs, or drive a car while on particular medications.

Know what's happening

- Find out about the person's illness and what to expect.
- Attend appointments (if the person you are looking after agrees).
- When in the appointment, take notes so you can discuss it later. Also remember that you are there mainly to watch and listen – it's their appointment.
- You might be too stressed to take much in during an appointment. Before you leave, ask if there is a telephone number you can call if you have questions.
- Ask lots of questions. Even questions you feel silly asking. These are often the most important.

Make a list of important information

Write down important information in one place, and keep it somewhere easy to get to.

This might include:

- telephone numbers to call in an emergency
- a safety plan if the person is at risk of suicide
- any medications the person is taking
- any side effects to watch out for
- legal paperwork (such as power of attorney and guardianship information)
- the early warning signs of the person becoming unwell, and what to do when this happens
- what has worked in the past
- any other information you think is relevant.

Then, if you are away or unable to care for the person, someone else can quickly access all the details.

Share this information with the person you are supporting.

“A mental illness in a loved one can feel like a loss. The person you knew seems to be gone. They are there, and not there at the same time. Knowing that there are others out there going through the same thing is so important.”

Jim, New Zealand

Look after yourself

Being a carer can be hard work and it may sometimes feel that you are getting nowhere.

It can be helpful to:

- look after your own needs first
- take a break whenever you can
- join a carer support group so you can talk about your experiences with others who understand
- look out for psychological symptoms of your own, particularly depression.

Employment rights

You may be entitled to take paid or unpaid leave from your job to care for someone in your immediate family or household. Contact the Fair Work Ombudsman (Australia) or Employment New Zealand to find out more about carer's leave.

Financial support

Contact Centrelink (Australia) or Health NZ to find out about the carer payments available.

Respite care

Respite care is where a paid carer looks after the person for a few hours or overnight, to give you a break. They can come to the person's home, or the person can go to the respite carer.

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre
1800 052 222 (Australia)

Ministry of Health Disability Support Services
0800 373 664 (New Zealand)

Someone to talk to

There are many services available to help carers. But it can be bit of a maze finding out what's relevant and useful to your situation.

These telephone numbers will connect you to someone who can talk you through the different options available.

Mental Health Carers Australia 1800 811 747

Mental Health Carers Australia helps people with mental illness, their carers and families. When you call, you can talk about your situation and what you're going through. Staff can link you to carer support services nearby.

Carer Gateway 1800 422 737

An Australian web and telephone service that provides practical information and resources to support carers.

Carers NZ 0800 777 797

Support for New Zealand family, whānau, and aiga carers.

Remember

- ✓ Support from family and friends is important for people with mental illness and for you as the carer.
- ✓ Financial, emotional and respite help is available for carers.
- ✓ Taking a break from caring is important for your own, and your loved one's, wellbeing.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.