SANE

FACTSHEET

FAMILIES, FRIENDS & CARERS

QUICK FACTS

- Mental health issues affect around 20% of Australians every year (ABS, 2008), but it is possible to live a full and meaningful life even if you experience mental health issues.
- This factsheet answers commonly-asked questions about the effects of mental health issues on the families of people affected, and how they can be supported to help the person and themselves.
- The term ‘family’ is used in this factsheet to describe any relative or friend who cares about a person living with mental health issues.

HOW ARE FAMILIES AFFECTED?

- Many mental health issues first appear when the person is in their late teens or early twenties. Whether it’s depression, an anxiety disorder, or a less common condition such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, symptoms are likely to occur when the person is still living with their family. Even if they have moved out of home or are older, the symptoms may not only be distressing for them, but may affect others too.
- Mental health issues often have a ‘ripple effect’ on families, creating tension, uncertainty, troubled emotions and big changes in how people live their lives. Different family members are likely to be affected in different ways. These effects on the family are sometimes not acknowledged by health professionals.
- Families may also take on the role of day-to-day care. This often happens with little training or support, or acknowledgment of their own needs and mental health. When families are accepted as partners in care and do receive training and support, there is strong evidence that this leads to better outcomes for everyone involved.
- Sometimes families are not listened to by health professionals. ‘Patient confidentiality’ may be given as a reason for this, but sometimes families aren't invited into treatment even if it would be consensual and helpful. Yet families are often the main support for people living with mental health issues, and have a right to be treated as ‘partners in care’. They need information about mental health issues and treatment provided, and about training or support that can help them support others and themselves.

WHERE DO WE START?

It is important to maintain a sense of hope, and to develop practical skills. This can mean:

Coming to terms with the fact that someone you care for experiences mental health issues and that this is likely to have a serious emotional impact on you as well as them. There may be anger at this happening in your family, confusion or a sense of loss and grief at how the person has been changed by their mental ill-health. It’s important to acknowledge and talk about these feelings.

Developing a sense of balance between different types of support approaches. It can take time to figure out what this looks like, but it might involve:

- acknowledging the effects of mental health issues on the person and hopes for recovery
- wanting to do things to help the person while them to be independent
- showing you care while not being over-involved
- giving the person your time while having time for yourself and other family members too
- encouraging the person to do things while not being unrealistic and demanding.

Preparing yourself by learning as much as you can about the relevant mental health issue, and considering what you can reasonably do to support the person. Discuss this with other family members and the treating health professionals. If there is a type of care you cannot provide, then discuss with the health professional what arrangements can be made to provide it in some other way.

WHAT SKILLS DO WE NEED?

Living with mental health issues isn't easy. Caring for someone affected often isn't easy either, and sometimes first instincts are not helpful. Here are some information and tips that others have found useful:

- Talk things over with the person affected and other family members. Talk about how you feel and encourage others to do the same. Try to ensure everyone has the same understanding and position.
- Find out about any training for family carers of people with mental health issues you can attend, and consider joining a support group to meet others in your position.
- Encourage the person living with mental health issues to be involved as much as possible in looking after themselves, and to get out socially and do things in their local community as much as is practical.
- Consider the person as a whole – remember that they have the same range of personal, emotional and social needs as anyone else. Is their physical health being looked after by a GP? Are alcohol or drugs a problem which needs attention?
- If there are suicidal thoughts, self-harm or aggression towards others, take these seriously and discuss with a health professional. Prepare a plan together for what to do if someone becomes unwell again. Always have crisis numbers handy.
- Plan ahead for when you are unable to provide care. Talk about this with the person and health professionals, and consider what legal and financial steps may be needed to

ensure care continues.

WHAT DO WE DO IN A CRISIS?

When someone becomes extremely unwell, it can be distressing and confusing for others, as well as the person concerned. If you are concerned someone is at immediate risk to themselves or others, contact 000 or make contact with your local hospital.

If you are concerned, but there is not an immediate risk, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467. For more detail, see how to help in a crisis for guidance.

HOW CAN WE LOOK AFTER OURSELVES?

When caring for someone else, it's important to remember to look after yourself and other family members too.

- Allow for regular 'time out'. Make sure to make time to regularly do things you enjoy and to socialise. Ask about respite care to give everyone a break.
- Talk about how you feel. Don't 'bottle up' feelings if you are sometimes frustrated or need support. Let the treating health professionals and others know how you feel, and ask for support if you need it.
- Be sensible about what you reasonably can – and cannot – do. Try to prioritise and organise what you need to do, by making a weekly list for example. Ensure that this is realistic and fair, and that it includes time for yourself and others as well as the person you are caring for.
- Don't try to do too much. Pace yourself and look out for signs that you are becoming stressed. Have a plan for what to do if this happens.

WHERE CAN WE FIND SUPPORT?

- Ask a health professional or call the SANE's free counselling service on 1800 18 SANE (7263) for details of support groups and other services for family carers in your local area. There may also be groups for young people whose families are affected.
- Visit the SANE Forums online to share experiences, information, and support with other family and carers.
- Centrelink provide details of benefits and services for family carers as well as for people with a mental illness. See www.centrelink.gov.au or call 132 717.
- Call Carer Gateway on 1800 422 737 for details of services for people with a disability and their carers.

HOW DO I GET MORE INFORMATION?

Contact SANE's free counselling support online or on 1800 187 263 for information, guidance, and referral.