

Queensland Health Fact sheet 2

You're not alone

Definitions as used in this fact sheet

A **carer** is a person who voluntarily provides ongoing care or assistance to another person who, because of mental health issues or psychiatric disability, requires assistance.

Consumer is used to describe the person for whom you care. He or she may be a family member, spouse, friend or 'significant other'.

The initial shock

Learning how to support someone with a mental illness can be a bewildering and challenging experience. You may have experienced significant stress during the period before the consumer's illness was recognised and further anxiety about how and where to get help and access services. You may now need to learn a new set of unfamiliar medical terms while also trying to make sense of your feelings, the illness and what the future may hold. You will probably have many questions.

When someone experiences mental illness, every member of the family is affected, including parents, spouse, children and siblings, as well as friends. Most people have limited or no experience of mental illness and they may experience a whole range of feelings. Some of the reactions commonly experienced by family members are:

Guilt: Where did I go wrong? Did I do anything to cause this?

Stigma: What will other people think? I feel ashamed and/or embarrassed. Who can I talk to?

Fear of the unknown: What will happen to him/her, and to our family? What if they harm themselves or become violent?

Confusion/anxiety/jealousy: What do I tell my friends? What about me? Why should he/she get all the attention? Siblings may become confused or anxious about the changed behaviour of the consumer and often fear that they may become unwell in the same way.

Frustration/anger: I can't fix this problem. I need real help and can't find it. Why can't he/she pull themselves together?

Hurt: Why can't other people understand? Why do they criticise him/her/our family/me?

Grief: What has happened to this person I love so much? Will they ever be the same again?

You are not alone in feeling these emotions.

It is extremely important that you and other family members seek support for yourselves to discover how to cope with these challenging questions and to learn appropriate new coping strategies. This will help you support the consumer on their journey to recovery as well as to provide strong support for each other.

Caring for yourself

When someone with a mental illness is in crisis, you may need to be constantly alert and to provide 24-hour support for a time. Be aware of what is possible and realistic and seek assistance for those things you cannot do. When the crisis is over and things have started to settle down, you need to take a step back to care for yourself. No one can be physically and emotionally involved all the time without it affecting their own emotional and physical health.

When you equip yourself to handle the ongoing demands of caring and prepare for the future, you also strengthen your ability to cope with everyday challenges and experience greater peace of mind.

Useful strategies

- Find out everything you can about the illness and the treatment options. Ask questions, read books, browse websites, join at least one support group. Share your discoveries and knowledge with supportive family and friends.
- Develop an action plan in case of crisis. Ask for someone in the mental health service (MHS) or your support group to help you with this and write it down.
- Be flexible. Accept that there are some things in life you cannot control.
- Wherever possible involve the consumer, as well as the relevant services, in planning and decision-making. Think how you would feel in the consumer's shoes. They may feel afraid, powerless and/or angry. The opportunity to be involved in making decisions, even small ones, is an important part of their recovery.
- Learn relaxation techniques such as slow, deep breathing to help you remain calm, regardless of the circumstances. This is an essential part of crisis management, since the more unwell a consumer may be, the more important it is for those around them to stay composed and not panic.

- Keep important phone numbers and information on hand so that you can access them quickly if necessary.
- Find out about the emergency services offered by your local MHS as well as the role of ambulance and police services in times of crisis.
- Aim to have a balance in your life:
 - Take regular exercise and eat healthy foods.
 - Maintain hobbies or activities that you enjoy and find personally rewarding and satisfying.
 - Spend quality time with other family members and friends.
 - Nurture a positive outlook and a sense of humour. Watch comedies and share jokes.
 - Maintain your spirituality. This is different for everyone and may include formal or informal religion or other spiritual connections.
 - Access support in your role as carer. Find a support group, seek out counselling or identify one or more understanding friends. If possible, do all three.
- Maintain your sense of hope.

Information

The following organisations and links may be a helpful source of further information:

- Mental Health Carers ARAFMI Queensland Inc (ARAFMI) www.arafmiqld.org 1800 351 881
- Carers Queensland www.carersqld.asn.au or 1800 242 636
- Mental Illness Fellowship of Queensland www.mifa.org.au/mifq
- A Guide to Coping www.fds.org.au or www.quihn.org
- Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/qtmhc/ or phone 3167 8333, 1800 188 189 (outside the Brisbane metropolitan area)
- Multicultural Centre for Mental Health and Well-being, Harmony Place www.harmonyplace.org.au
- ReachOut Australia (for young people) www.reachout.com.au
- Children of Parents with Mental Illness www.copmi.net.au
- beyondblue:the national depression initiative www.beyondblue.org.au or 1300 22 4636

Additional information for carers can be found on the Queensland Health Carers Matter website at www.health.qld.gov.au/mhcarer

*Endorsed by Dr Aaron Groves
Executive Director
Mental Health Alcohol and Other Drugs Directorate
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