

What is Happening to my Loved One?

Answers to Questions about the Journey of Mental Illness

The following attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions a person with mental illness and their loved ones may ask during the journey.

What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness is a broad term for large categories of mental disorders such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, personality disorders, substance use disorders and addictions, and Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. The symptoms of mental illness can be mild, moderate or severe and may appear at different times in a person's life.

Mental illness is not the same as being mentally handicapped or challenged, or what is now known as a developmental disability. People who are developmentally challenged as a result of a genetic disorder such as Down's syndrome are born with developmental delays that can affect a person's intellectual development and functioning.

In contrast, mental illness affects a person's thinking, feeling and behaviour. It cuts across age, gender, economic, ethnic and political boundaries. Mental illness is treatable where most people recover to lead meaningful and productive lives. We know one in five British Columbians have or will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives.

Why did this happen to them?

Mental illness can happen to anyone. Mental illness is nobody's fault. It is not the result of bad parenting, emotional weakness or personal failure. Most people with mental illness are productive members of society. They have jobs, relationships, family, and hobbies and are active members of their communities. Some of the most exceptional and influential people in the world have publicly disclosed that they have a mental illness. It may seem that sometimes due to setbacks, your loved one may find it hard to achieve these things. It is important to have hope.

Why does my loved one feel so out of control?

Recovery from the illness is only one part of the process. Many individuals with mental illness must also rebuild a sense of self-worth and recover from the side effects of unemployment, long periods in treatment settings and the stigma and discrimination attached to mental disorders. Reclaiming these aspects of life are sometimes more difficult than recovering from illness itself. Crushed dreams may take a long time to mend especially if they are young and have had few opportunities to direct their life.

Why is my loved one sleeping so much/so little?

Sleep patterns often get disrupted when a person is experiencing mental illness. Some of the side effects of medications to treat their illness may also disrupt their sleep patterns.

Why is my loved one gaining/losing weight?

Mental illness affects each person differently. There are some medications that have an impact on a person's weight. Medications can increase one's appetite and metabolism. This is an unpleasant side effect but encourage your loved one to stay on their medication even if they are gaining or losing weight. Encourage them to talk to their doctor about their weight gain/loss. There may be ways to address this as a team. It is also important to maintain a healthy diet and get as much exercise as possible so they can keep any weight gain/loss under control.

Why does my loved one seem so anxious and restless?

Feeling anxious or restless may be a symptom of their mental illness, a side effect of medication or a part of their life circumstances. Encourage your loved one to identify and try to reduce those things that make them anxious. Help them to find someone professional to talk to about what is making them feel this way. Encourage the use of relaxation techniques and exercise.

Why is my loved one afraid of leaving the house?

Stimulating circumstances can be really hard to handle when a person with mental illness is in the early stages of their recovery. It takes time to get back to doing things they used to enjoy. Family gatherings, crowds and situations where there is lots of noise, lights, colours and sounds may be hard for your loved one to handle for some time. Be patient and try not to expect too much too soon.

Why does my loved one have difficulty concentrating?

The symptoms of your loved one's illness and/or the side effects of the medications may impact their ability to concentrate but it has not impacted their intelligence. You don't have to speak to your loved one like they are a "six year old" but do try to be as concrete and clear as possible when you are speaking with someone who is having difficulty concentrating.

Why has my loved one's sexual desire changed so much?

Your loved one's sexual drive may increase or decrease as a result of their illness or a side effect of the medication to treat their illness. If it is an issue for you, try to speak with your loved one about this and how it affects you. Together, you and your loved one may want to talk about this change with their mental health worker and/or doctor to ensure they are supported in practicing safe sex.

Why don't my loved one's friends/family/neighbours/co-workers understand?

Some people shy away from people with mental disorders, but in some cases it is not the person with mental illness they fear but their lack of knowledge about the illness.

Unfortunately the media and movies have perpetuated misconceptions about mental illness. Additionally, some people are uncomfortable and don't know what to say. Try to give them a break. In time, they may come around. Encourage your loved one to surround themselves with supportive people. They are still interesting and intelligent. Through their journey, they will meet new friends who are understanding of their experience and able to see beyond their illness.

Why have some of my loved one's friends/family left them?

There are situations some people just cannot handle because they lack compassion and understanding or, they need to take a step back for their own health, learning and/or acceptance. Sometimes the symptoms of mental illness can be hard to deal with which make some people uncomfortable. It is unfortunate but it is a part of life. Help your loved one to move on and find new friends and supports.

In order to offer caring and support for people with mental illness, it is important to recognize that symptoms of these illnesses are often beyond their control. People with mental illness are unable to just "snap out of it". They cannot stop their symptoms simply by trying harder than someone with impaired hearing can hear better by trying harder to listen.

What can I do? Some things to remember

- Willpower has nothing to do with eliminating illness.
- Counting your blessings or looking on the bright side is an impossible task for someone who is ill, unless they know someone really cares.
- Keeping busy or getting a hobby are valuable tools, but only when the person is well enough to take the first step. Encourage them not to take on too much at once.
- A change of scenery may be hard to find. In the early stages of recovery, the dark cloud of mental illness goes with people wherever they are.
- Trying harder may only compound the illness. Encourage your loved on to relax and not fight the feelings. They will pass.
- Spirituality, religion and faith may have a part in their recovery/healing, but only if they are rooted in feelings of mental and emotional health, not illness.
- It may be helpful for your loved one to examine the stressful aspects of their life that contribute to the severity of their illness.
- It really helps to have someone who will listen unconditionally. Someone who will be patient and not frightened by what is said. Meaningful relationships are very important for your loved one's sense of self-worth and happiness.
- Stay open minded and curious.
- Setting some boundaries may be very important both for you and your loved one.

Things to think about your loved one's recovery

- Professional help is one factor in recovery – help is also found through self-help groups, family support, social support, adult education, meaningful employment, adequate housing and self-care.
- Recovery can be everyone's business – a key aspect of recovery is the presence of people who believe in and stand by the person in need of recovery.
- There are support groups for family members who have also "been there". When you are ready, this support can be invaluable to you and your understanding of what your loved one is going through.
- Recovery is possible even though symptoms may reoccur – the episodic nature of mental illness does not rule out recovery.

- Recovery is not a linear process – unexpected growth or insights may follow periods of little change. A relapse does not mean progress is suddenly undone.
- Recovery from the consequences of mental illness is sometimes more difficult than recovering from the illness itself – e.g. Dealing with stigma, lowered self—esteem, discrimination in employment and housing
- Successful recovery does not mean the person was never really mentally ill – because of the inaccurate assumption that people with serious mental illness, especially schizophrenia, cannot recover, people who do get better are sometimes wrongly believed to have been misdiagnosed.
- Recovery can mean many things to many people. Think about what your loved one’s recovery means to you. Be realistic in your expectations.

Sources

- William Anthony, Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation.
- Fact Sheets on Mental Health and Addictions Issues – BC Partners for Mental Health and Addiction Information.