



## Living with someone with mental health challenges

By age 40, around 50 per cent of Canadians will have experienced a mental health challenge or illness. So, it's likely that, at some point, someone in your household will struggle with their mental health.

When you're living with someone who is experiencing mental health struggles, it's natural to be unsure of what to do. You may want to help but aren't sure how or what you can do or even when they may need more support than you can offer. If you're ever concerned for a loved one's safety, contact 911. But for most other scenarios, here are some strategies to help you help them.

### Signs that someone you live with is struggling

There are three main signs that someone you live with is experiencing mental health challenges.

#### 1. Behavioural changes

Your loved one stops engaging in a hobby or activity they are normally passionate about, or they stop attending to their personal hygiene or appearance in the same way as they did previously. They may also change their eating or sleeping behaviours without intention or awareness of how severe the changes may be.

#### 2. "Arousal" behaviours

Your loved one seems more anxious, agitated or is having trouble sleeping.

#### 3. "Avoidance" behaviours

Your loved one seems more withdrawn or isolated or is avoiding things that seem stressful. This includes stimulating or crowded situations.

These behaviours on their own don't necessarily show signs of mental health struggle – but when taken as a whole, they are good indicators that your loved one needs help.

### Key concerns for people living with someone who is struggling

The moods and behaviours of one person in a household can dramatically impact others in the household. When a loved one – especially a partner – is experiencing a mental health issue, it's common to see this affect the relationship. The energy taken by the mental health issue means there is less energy for the relationship, and mental health concerns often cause low mood, which can make it difficult to communicate, resolve conflict or enjoy quality time together. It's important not to blame yourself or your partner. It can be helpful to externalize the problem



by reminding yourself that the mental health issue, not your partner, is to blame.

The same goes for parent-child relationships. Parents with mental health concerns are likely to experience a similar lack of energy for parenting, which can burden the other parent with more than their share of those duties. If you're parenting with someone with mental health issues, caring for yourself is also an act of caring for your children by helping ensure you have the energy that they need from you.

It's important to remember that nothing that happens around us occurs in isolation. It makes sense that if someone in our household is struggling, we too may experience feelings of anxiety or helplessness. Taking time to attend to your personal mental health needs and staying connected to your support system is vital to avoid burnout.

### How to support someone who is struggling

It's not always easy to know what to do to help someone. But being present for them is key – showing that you're there for them may help ease their struggle.

It is common for people with a mental health concern to have a low level of awareness around their illness. This could mean that friends and family see signs and symptoms of the person's illness and may be unsure about how to bring it up. This situation can be tricky, as when we try to let our loved one know what we are seeing, we may inadvertently trigger their defenses. A way around this is to take an educational approach. Give them information and let them know about options available to help. Being present at the right time will mean that when the person needs you, you will be available.

It's best to speak about mental illness in a matter-of-fact way with the appropriate terms. For example, check in and invite them to tell you how they're doing by saying something like, "How have your depression symptoms been lately?" instead of, "So how's your mental health stuff been?" or "Have your 'happy pills' been helping?" Using innuendo and outdated language like "crazy" perpetuates stigma and makes people less likely to talk about how they're feeling. It also makes it unlikely that you'll know how they're really doing and what kind of support is helpful to them.

### Dealing with treatment

When it comes to treatment, the evidence is clear – a holistic approach is key for the best outcomes. This should include counselling or other talk approaches, in addition to the possibility of appropriate medication, lifestyle changes and reducing sources of stress.

The purpose of talk approaches is to provide an outlet to share the negative experiences someone might be having and learn new skills to solve problems. In the case of certain mental health concerns, medication might be an effective tool to give people the short- or long-term assistance they need to navigate their illness. When community-based services aren't enough and people require stabilization, regional health services in Manitoba have a range of acute programs and facilities to ensure people are kept safe until they are stabilized. In the case of a medical or mental health emergency, always call 911.

Remember that treatment is most effective when it involves a willing participant. It's important to respect that everyone will be motivated toward change in different ways and on their own timeline. If a loved one isn't ready to seek treatment, continue to check in with them and offer support. Your role is not to be a problem solver, so don't worry about needing to find solutions – just listen. It's common for supportive friends and family to begin to feel burned out over time, so be sure to mind your boundaries and attend to your own needs regularly.

*- John Jackson, Reg. Psychiatric Nurse, MPN*

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