

# COPING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

The impact of mental illness extends to all spheres of life. Supporting a person with a mental illness requires knowledge of what they might find harmful or helpful. Mental illness often directly impacts those around the affected person.

## ENCOURAGE TREATMENT

Stigmas around mental illness can make it hard for those affected to reach out for help. They often feel ashamed and mistakenly believe they should be able to overcome their illness with willpower alone. You can help your loved one realise that professional help is needed and that they have a medical condition, and not a personal flaw or weakness.

## GET THE PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED

If you suspect that a friend, colleague or family member has a mental illness, they should consult a medical professional. A family doctor can assist in finding a psychiatrist and/or psychologist for the person who is suffering from a mental illness. Alternatively, you can contact the Healthy Company support line for advice, support and further referral to a professional.

When someone you love suffers, it affects you too. If you know the general principles of how to support them, you can help them to cope with their condition. For example, if someone you love has depression, you need to take their emotion as seriously as they're felt. 'A depressed person can't just feel better,' notes Cassey Chambers from the South African Anxiety and Depression Group (SADAG) 'Depression is a disease.'

The same can be said for loved ones with other mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder or anxiety. 'Learn about the illness,' adds Chambers. 'The more you know, the more you can help. Have a look at the Healthy Company library for educational articles.'

## OFFER INVISIBLE ASSISTANCE

You can offer support, just don't draw attention to it, advises a study from the University of Alberta. 'Efforts from a partner to help alleviate stress may prevent the development or worsening of mental health problems and, in fact, could help keep the relationship healthy,' says Matthew Johnson, relationships researcher and a professor in the university's Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences. 'Studies suggest offering support your partner may not even be aware of, but would still be a helpful gesture, like taking care of a sink full of dirty dishes they haven't seen yet.'

## GET OUT AND ABOUT

A large body of evidence shows that physical activity can lift your mood. One really good way of supporting someone with a mental illness is to make sure they get moving. Being inactive may feel preferable for the person affected by a mental illness, but the best thing you can do is to go for regular walks together.

## DON'T PATRONISE OR BELITTLE

You may want to shelter your loved one from difficult family scenarios or potentially stressful situations. But don't treat them like a child in doing so. SADAG says it's important to keep social and community conversations as normal as possible.

'Don't leave the person out of family discussions because you think that it would be less stressful for them if they're not involved. Treat the person as normally as possible. Ask the person what they hope, fear, feel and need.'

## HELP THEM TO FOLLOW A HEALTHY DIET

If you share a home with someone who has a mental illness, see if you can make it easier for them to eat well. That means cutting out refined carbohydrates and eating more fresh, whole foods. 'Multiple studies have found a correlation between a diet high in refined sugars and impaired brain function – and even a worsening of symptoms of mood disorders, such as depression,' writes Dr Eva Selhub on the Harvard Health Blog.

Give Healthy Company a call to learn more about the benefits available to you and your loved ones on mental illness treatment options. Some mental health conditions qualify for additional counselling benefits.

### CHAT TO HEALTHY COMPANY FOR FREE ADVICE

Healthy Company is here for you. Contact us through the Discovery app, [www.discovery.co.za](http://www.discovery.co.za) or **0800 320 420**