



How to cope with a loved one's mental health condition

When a loved one is diagnosed with depression, anxiety or another mental health condition, family and friends can feel a swirl of intense emotions: everything from disbelief to guilt, hurt, embarrassment, anger, shame or fear. You may also be unsure of what it means and at a loss for what to do.

Rest assured, there is hope. With the right care plan and adherence to it, most people diagnosed with a mental health condition can experience a fulfilling life. Learning to cope with and manage a condition takes time, patience, adherence and support for the person with the diagnosis — and for you.

Here are a few ways to get started.

Take care of yourself

The first, most important thing you can do is take care of yourself. Do what you can to support yourself with the basics for your health: get enough sleep, eat nutritious foods, exercise regularly and practice self-care.

Also, give yourself the time and permission to experience all the things you're feeling. It can take time to wrap your brain and heart around the diagnosis, accept it and learn to move forward.

Keep in mind that it's a journey, and support is available. Consider seeking the help of a therapist or support group to help you navigate and cope with helping your loved one.

Educate yourself

Taking care of yourself also means knowing when to take a step back to move forward.

Even if you believe you understand the condition, do some research to educate yourself. Studying up on the condition will help you better understand what the person is dealing with, what to expect, and how best to support them and yourself. Learning about the symptoms, treatment options and potential expected short- and long-term health outcomes can help give you peace of mind and a sense of direction.

It's important to find the balance between learning more and becoming overwhelmed with too much information. Avoid "doomscrolling" and reading worst-case scenarios. Also, make sure to use legitimate, reliable sources — like government institutes, professional associations and patient advocacy organizations — to avoid misinformation.

Help them learn to lead

Just as with physical medical conditions, people who have mental health conditions tend to achieve and sustain better health when they have a sense of responsibility and autonomy to manage their own treatment journeys.

Think about ways you can help them be empowered and supported to manage their condition in ways that fit their age and maturity level. For example, if they take medication to manage their condition, consider offering them a pill box organizer and help them learn how to use it.

Set realistic expectations

Try to remember that learning to manage a mental illness is a process. If the person goes on medication to help address the symptoms, it can take time to find the right medication and dosage, as well as for the medication itself to take effect. Also, treatment and recovery are not linear. Many people living with a mental health condition experience improvements and setbacks. They also face the challenges of stigma and discrimination. Depending on the condition and its severity, they may not fully grasp how you're trying to help them or what you're going through.

All you can do is your best for your loved one and yourself. Rest assured, your support does make a difference.

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The benefits of laughter

Looking for a reason to laugh? Here's a great one: it's good for your mental health and wellness. An increasing body of scientific evidence shows that laughter relieves depression, anxiety and stress, among other health benefits.^{1, 2, 3}

Laughter is a physiological response to humour in which the brain simultaneously makes you gesture and produce sound.⁴ When we do this, our bodies experience changes. When you laugh, 15 facial muscles contract and trigger your upper lip to go up. At the same time, your larynx closes halfway, triggering you to intake air irregularly, which makes you gasp. If you're laughing really hard, you may find yourself tearing up and your face getting red, because technically you're struggling for oxygen. And you produce sounds, whether quietly or loudly, short or long – giggles, chuckles, har-hars, ho-hos, ha-has, heh-hehs...

In simple terms, when all this happens, laughter triggers the reduction of stress hormones and the release of 'feel-good' ones.

So, it can boost a person's mood, ease tension and help them relax. The chemicals being triggered also help fight off stress, which in turn improves a person's immune response to help fight illnesses. Plus, laughing has been shown to stimulate the function of the heart, lungs and muscles, relieve physical pain, improve sleep quality and even burn calories.

Another benefit of laughter is that it brings people together. Making connections and feeling connected is a best practice for feeling hope and building resilience.

Sounds like laughing is a win-win-win, eh?

Struggling to find something to laugh about? Here are some tips for getting the humorous triggers going:

- Create a collection of whatever makes you laugh, so you have it ready to roll. This could be podcasts, memes, films, cards, sayings, videos, songs, photos, books...
- Spend time with people you find funny.
- Go to a comedy show.
- Do an Internet search for jokes, and read through them until you find yourself chuckling.
- Listen to someone else laughing, as it will often make you laugh eventually, too.
- Even if you're finding it hard to find a reason to laugh, going through the motions of laughter can be of benefit. Laughter therapy, also called laughter intervention, uses exercises, games and comedy to help relieve stress and pain. There's also a form of yoga, 'laughter yoga', that helps people crack one another up.

Now, how about taking some time to laugh?

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How to navigate tough conversations with kids

It's not easy for most people to have conversations about depression or other mental health conditions. For parents and other caregivers, it can be even harder. It may feel awkward, and we might be afraid that kids will shut down if we start talking. But it's important to try. Keeping an open line of communication can make a significant difference.

The following tips can help you navigate conversations with a young person about the tough issues they could be facing:

Be present

- Trust your instincts. If a child isn't acting like their 'usual self', that might be a sign that they are struggling with something.

Every child is unique and responds differently to tough issues. Consider where the child feels most comfortable talking and expressing concerns and questions. **Talk early, talk often.**

- Don't wait for a crisis to start the conversation.
- Look for and use conversation starters whenever you can. A TV show or news story can be a great way to gauge how they're feeling about an issue. Watch their body language. Openly share your feelings in the conversation, too.
- Create opportunities to have small talks throughout your day or week so the lines of communication stay open. This can help take the pressure off having big conversations.

Listen

- Listen with compassion and empathy, and without judgement.
- Be present while listening, and give your full attention.
- Model healthy reactions. Children look to see how we react to difficult situations (a death, crisis or bad decision, etc.).
- Stay calm. When the child sees you panicking, they're less likely to open up. Remain composed by listening to learn more.

Acknowledge how the young person feels or thinks.

- Too often, we are quick to give advice or tell them they 'shouldn't' feel that way. This can make the young person feel like we are minimising their experience.
- Instead, ask questions to learn more about what they think and feel.
- Be careful not to criticise or jump to conclusions.
- The most important thing is that they feel as though you really heard them and were supportive.

Stay informed

- Pay attention to media and social media. It's important to be aware of what your child is watching.
- Share facts. Make sure that you give your child helpful, accurate information. Do research, and don't make things up in an attempt to scare or overwhelm them.
- Try not to make assumptions. If they ask you a question, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're engaging in the behaviour.

Recognise their courage

- It's important to give positive feedback when a young person builds the courage to talk about tough things with an adult.

Talk about what's next

- Find ways to build off the language they use and the topics they identify as important. This can help them lead the conversation and create more opportunities for you to learn more.
- Ask them what they think about when it comes to problem-solving or next steps.

Finally, it's important to know that you are not alone in feeling like it can be hard to talk to a young person about tough things. Be sure to find ways to connect with your own support network and engage in activities that promote your own well-being. This can help you be in a good place when talking to a young person.

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