

## **Coping Tips for Siblings and Adult Children of Persons with Mental Illness**

If you find it difficult to come to terms with your sibling's or parent's mental illness, there are many others who share your difficulty. Most siblings and adult children of people with psychiatric disorders find that mental illness in a brother, sister, or parent is a tragic event that changes everyone's life in many basic ways. Strange, unpredictable behaviors in a loved one can be devastating, and your anxiety can be high as you struggle with each episode of illness and worry about the future. It seems impossible at first, but most siblings and adult children find that over time they do gain the knowledge and skills to cope with mental illness effectively. They do have strengths they never knew they had, and they can meet situations they never even anticipated.

A good start in learning to cope is to find out as much as possible about mental illness, both by reading and talking with other families. NAMI has books, pamphlets, fact sheets, and tapes available about different illnesses, treatments, and issues you may have to deal with, and you can join one of the 1,200 NAMI affiliate groups throughout the nation. (For other resources and contact information about your state and local NAMI affiliates, call the [NAMI HelpLine](tel:1-800-950-6264) at **1-800/950-6264**.)

The following are some things to remember that should help you as you learn to live with mental illness in your family:

- You cannot cure a mental disorder for a parent or sibling.
- No one is to blame for the illness.
- Mental disorders affect more than the person who is ill.
- Despite your best efforts, your loved one's symptoms may get worse, or they may improve.
- If you feel extreme resentment, you are giving too much.
- It is as hard for the parent or sibling to accept the disorder as it is for other family members.
- Acceptance of the disorder by all concerned may be helpful, but it is not necessary.
- A delusion has little or nothing to do with reality, so it needs no discussion.
- Separate the person from the disorder.

- It is not OK for you to be neglected. You have emotional needs and wants, too.
- The illness of a family member is nothing to be ashamed of. The reality is that you will likely encounter stigma from an apprehensive public.
- You may have to revise your expectations of the ill person.
- You may have to renegotiate your emotional relationship with the ill person.
- Acknowledge the remarkable courage your sibling or parents may show when dealing with a mental disorder.
- Generally, those closest in sibling order and gender become emotionally enmeshed while those further out become estranged.
- Grief issues for siblings are about what you had and lost. For adult children, they are about what you never had.
- After denial, sadness, and anger comes acceptance. The addition of understanding yields compassion.
- It is absurd to believe you may correct a biological illness such as diabetes, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder with talk, although addressing social complications may be helpful.
- Symptoms may change over time while the underlying disorder remains.
- You should request the diagnosis and its explanation from professionals.
- Mental health professionals have varied degrees of competence.
- You have a right to ensure your personal safety.
- Strange behavior is a symptom of the disorder. Don't take it personally.
- Don't be afraid to ask your sibling or parent if he or she is thinking about hurting him- or herself. Suicide is real.
- Don't shoulder the whole responsibility for your mentally disordered relative yourself.
- You are not a paid professional caseworker. Your role is to be a sibling or child, not a parent or caseworker.
- The needs of the ill person do not necessarily always come first.
- If you can't care for yourself, you can't care for another.
- It is important to have boundaries and to set clear limits.
- Just because a person has limited capabilities doesn't mean that you expect nothing of him or her.
- It is natural to experience many and confusing emotions such as grief, guilt, fear, anger, sadness, hurt, confusion, and more. You, not the ill person, are responsible for your own feelings.
- Inability to talk about your feelings may leave you stuck or "frozen."
- You are not alone. Sharing your thoughts and feelings in a support group has been helpful and enlightening for many.
- Eventually you may see the silver lining in the storm clouds: your own increased awareness, sensitivity, receptivity, compassion, and maturity. You may become less judgmental and self-centered, a better person.

*July 2001*