

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## COPING TIPS FOR FAMILIES OF PERSONS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

If you find it difficult to come to terms with the challenges presented by a family member's mental health condition, you are not alone; there are many others who share your difficulty. Most families find that it changes everyone's life in many fundamental ways. Strange, unpredictable behaviors in a loved one can be devastating, and your own personal anxiety can increase as you struggle with each episode and worry about the future. It seems impossible at first, but most people find that over time they do gain the knowledge and skills to cope with the challenges effectively. They find that they have strengths they never knew they had, and they are able to meet situations that they never anticipated facing. Here are some tips for coping effectively:

- You cannot cure a mental health condition for someone you love.
- No one is to blame for the one you love developing the condition.
- Mental health conditions affect more than that person who is ill; they affect everyone who cares about them.
- Despite your best efforts, your loved one's symptoms will change for the better or sometimes for the worse; it is out of your control.
- It is important to learn to separate the condition and its symptoms from the person you love.
- Remember that it is often quite difficult for the person you love to accept his or her condition. This is a process that you may also struggle with.

### Strategies and Realities

- Acknowledge the remarkable courage and strengths your family member may show when dealing with a mental health condition.
- After denial, sadness, and anger over learning about your loved one's mental health condition comes acceptance. Acceptance and understanding of the condition itself yield compassion for the person you love.
- The symptoms presented by the condition may change with time and circumstance. This can make expectations of your loved one a challenge – stay flexible.
- If you are involved with your loved one's treatment, obtain permission from the loved one to request the actual diagnosis and its explanation from the mental health treatment team to deepen your understanding of the condition.
- Mental health professionals have varied degrees of expertise and competence. If your loved one isn't getting what is needed, assess your ability to engage with him or her to see how a case manager or other professional can help.
- Unusual and uncharacteristic behavior may be a symptom of the condition. Don't take it personally.
- Don't be afraid to ask your family member if he or she is thinking about hurting himself or herself. The possibility of suicide is a real concern, and asking about it will not give your loved one the idea. See if there is a safety plan to address these concerns.

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### Self-Care

- Be sure to prioritize your own self-care. Exercise, good rest and nutrition, loving relationships, spiritual or religious support, support groups and hobbies are common avenues to support self-care.
- It is important to establish boundaries and to set clear limits for yourself.
- It is natural for you to experience a variety of emotions, such as grief, guilt, fear, anger, sadness, hurt, confusion, and more. You, not the person with the condition, are responsible for your own feelings. Getting support can often be quite helpful for these experiences.
- You are not alone. Sharing your thoughts and feelings in a support group has been helpful and enlightening for many. The shared experience found in support groups reduces isolation and stress.

*Source: The National Alliance on Mental Illness, [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).*