

Building Your Mental Health Support Network

Find out how support from friends, family, and other sources can help prevent recurrences of mental health issues and give you the positive reinforcement you need.

A strong support network can help ground you emotionally, and provide you with ideas for problem-solving. But people with mental health problems often have a hard time reaching out in no small part because they may be part of families with poor communication skills. Fortunately, there are many resources for creating a support network to provide the assistance you need.

Your Support Network: Friends and Family

Mental illness is very isolating. There is a lot of stigma. You can be isolated from your family from your friends, from your employer.

If you don't have people close to you, you might go off the deep end, but if people close to you can ask if you have been sleeping, if you have been taking your meds, if they can talk to you in that window of rationality, it can be lifesaving. That's the Catch-22 of mental illness-you might not know when it's going bad.

A formal support network can serve this purpose as well. A study of 120 people with bipolar disorder compared structured support groups to informal support groups and found that those in the structured groups with trained leaders were less likely to have a return of severe symptoms. People in the structured groups were also more likely to keep taking their prescribed medications.

This study also found that when caregivers and family members learn about helping patients and coping with mental health concerns in a support group setting, they are better able to prevent mental health crises. Patients whose spouse or other primary caregiver joined a support group were less likely to have a recurrence of severe manic symptoms.

Reaching out to loved ones may be difficult for you. You may feel that people will think less of you if they know you have a mental illness; you may be embarrassed by something you did or said to them before you were diagnosed; or, you may anticipate a negative, critical, or overly emotional response. Start by asking for just two things they can do to help you:

- To let you know if they see signs that your mental illness is returning.
- To join a support group to learn about living with mental illness.

Your Support Network: Seeking Support Online

For some people, online support is very helpful. There are a number of reasons for going online to get support, such as having a mental health concern that you don't want to discuss with family and friends. A survey of 85 people who were members of online support groups for trichotillomania (chronic hair-pulling) revealed that close to one-third had never told their family about their disorder, but that they found information about symptoms and treatments, as well as the friendships they formed through the trichotillomania support groups, very helpful.

Your Support Network: Learning to Communicate

People with mental illness and their families may need to learn new communication habits. Studies show that people who live in families where communication is often hostile, critical, or overly emotional are at higher risk of experiencing a relapse of their mental illness. Finding ways to break the "attack-counter attack" mode of communication is essential before you can reasonably ask for help.

You and your family may need to practice:

- Diplomatically making requests for change
- Rationally evaluating the pros and cons of a suggestion
- Giving both praise and constructive criticism
- Active listening

If your family needs help learning these skills, or is unwilling to practice healthier communication, speak with a mental health professional about how to deal with the situation.

Your Support Network: How Much Information Is Too Much?

The guidelines for sharing in a group focus on confidentiality, openness, and the use of "I-statements." which means talking about what you are going through solely from your own perspective. These rules should guide conversation with anyone about your mental health status.

It may take some time to learn the boundaries of sharing information with others and asking for help. Participation in support groups can help you identify when your requests to family and friends are excessive, group members often have practical tips to offer about how to handle these situations as they arise.