

## HEALTHY FAMILIES – IMPORTANT GUIDELINES FROM RESEARCH

Stress is known to impact both physical and mental health, so families can improve the health of the family members by making the family environment a low stress one. (Note: “Family” means anyone who supports a person’s recovery, whether kin or not.) Scientific research even shows that people diagnosed with serious mental illness often have fewer or less severe symptoms of mental illness and have lower rates of relapse and hospitalization when they live in a healthy and positive home environment. This research has led to the development of specific guidelines for families that, when followed, help improve the mental health of family members, especially those who may have mental health challenges.

Following guidelines for healthy family environments can have these benefits:

- Reduce overall stress for everyone
- Reduce the impact and symptoms of mental illness
- Improved social support
- Develop new coping skills and improve existing coping skills
- Reduce rates of relapse (periods of high symptoms of illness and poor functioning)
- Reduce (or making longer the time between) hospitalizations
- Increase understanding of the illness, how to work with the system, etc.
- Get the family member back into the community and increase access to other resources

### How Can the Family Help?

- Get educated about mental illness and how to help your family member manage or cope.
- Understand veteran’s goals and promote reasonable efforts to meet them.
- Avoid unhealthy risk factors in the home.
- Follow family guidelines for healthy a home environment.

### **Family risk factors associated with greater risk of symptoms of mental illness**

#### Intensity, negativity and complexity

- High levels of criticism or hostility
- Over-involvement or smothering and promoting dependence
- Lack of warmth in family interactions
- Pushing the person recovering from acute mental illness episode to perform past their current abilities

#### High Rate of Change

- Too many major life events or stressors happening in a short period of time
- Loss of or changes in social supports
- Frequent unscheduled transitions (changes in routines or tasks), e.g., a new job, home, marriage, etc

#### Physical and Chemical Factors

- Not taking medications regularly as prescribed for mental illness (should be per mutual plan)
- Alcohol & drug abuse (including prescription drug abuse) can increase symptoms and interfere with the ability of prescribed medications to work properly
- Environmental toxins
- Overstimulation, such as frequent loud noises; high light levels; crowding, etc.

## **FAMILY GUIDELINES- Healthy family interaction based on scientific research**

No guarantees, but following these guidelines helps limit relapses and minimize later problems:

Manage stress effectively - Higher stress is linked to greater risk of illness, so:

- Keep stress in the home at moderate levels, and take breaks from stress when possible.
- Get extra help and positive social support during times of high, prolonged stress.
- Learn and use stress management skills.
- Too few responsibilities can be a problem, as can too many responsibilities. Reaching for recovery goals can increase stress but also improve self-esteem – find the right balance!

Go At Your Own Pace

- Recovery from a mental health crisis or set back takes time, so don't push to resume normal activities too quickly. Lower expectations at first and allow time to rest and to heal.
- Mental health recovery happens differently for everyone. Be patient if progress is not happening as quickly as you would like. Compare progress this month to last month, rather than to last year.

Avoid too much stimulation

- Keep a balance between too much and too little stimulation, whether physical (lights, sounds, pain, etc) or mental (new tasks, lots of talking, crowding, lots of changes, etc).

Keep emotions/feelings in check – The “Goldilocks Rule”

- Relapse is often related to overstimulation and stress in the environment so lower the intensity of stimulation and emotions. Remember the story of Goldilocks? Emotional environment should be not too cold, not too hot, but just right, within the middle range.
- Keep strong positive and negative emotions (excitement, anger, anxiety, enthusiasm, etc) toned down. Avoid intense conflicts and disagreements.
- Family bonds are important, so help create a calm and emotionally safe environment for everyone. Don't be negative, distant, or cold, but don't be smothering or overly involved, either.

Give each other space - Everyone needs a time out from others sometimes.

- Sometimes, a little time away from others can be a way to manage stress and avoid overstimulation. It's OK to say no at times, but don't use this for avoidance.
- Have a plan everyone honors for taking a time-out to calm down or reduce tension, such as by retreating to a quiet room. Agree on a signal that means “Time Out” for your family member.

Communication - “KISS” - Keep It Simple & Short

- Be specific and clear in what you say. Avoid excessive detail.
- Keep conversations shorter, less complex, focused on practical, everyday topics.
- Discuss things in calm and positive ways.

Follow plan for treating the illness agreed on by you and your provider(s)

- Take medications as they are prescribed (but negotiate with your prescriber to get benefit with least amount of side effects possible).
- Avoid alcohol and drugs, both street drugs and those not prescribed - they can worsen symptoms, interfere with medications that do work, and prevent recovery.
- Participate in therapy and classes to learn how to manage illness symptoms and pursue goals.

### Pick up on early warning signs of mental health problems

- Both the Veteran and family members should know and watch for early signs of a relapse so they can take steps quickly to keep them from getting worse.
- Family members often spot early signs before the individual, so while everyone is calm, develop a plan for how family members can spot early signs and alert the Veteran.

### Solve problems step by step

- Make changes gradually and work on one thing at a time.
- Break big goals and changes down into several small steps.

### Families need to take care of themselves too.

- Re-establish family routines as quickly as possible after a relapse.
- Families should find time for support and relaxation.

### Set limits as needed and ignore what you can't change

- All families need a few good rules to keep things clear. Families can let some things slide but don't ignore threatening, violent, or psychotic behavior.

### **Family resources for veterans diagnosed with serious mental illnesses**

- The Depression Workbook by Mary Ellen Copeland, (Harbinger, 1992)
- Our Special Mom and Our Special Dad by Tootsie Sobkiewicz, (Pittsburgh: Children of Mentally Ill Parents, 1994 and 1996)
- The Complete Family Guide to Schizophrenia: Helping Your Loved One Get the Most Out of Life by Kim T. Mueser, Susan Gingerich
- Surviving Schizophrenia: A Manual for Families, Consumers, and Providers (4th Edition) by E. Fuller Torrey
- The Bipolar Workbook: Tools for Controlling Your Mood Swings by M. R. Basco (2005). (Guilford).
- Helping Someone with Mental Illness: A Compassionate Guide for Family, Friends, and Caregivers by Rosalynn Carter, Susan Ma Golant Three Rivers Press; (1999)
- How to Live with a Mentally Ill Person: A Handbook of Day-to-Day Strategies by Christine Adamec, (John Wiley and Sons, 1996)
- I am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help! - Helping the Seriously Mentally Ill Accept Treatment by Xavier Amador, Anna-Lica Johanson, Vida Press; (2000)

### **Websites**

- [www.mhsource.com](http://www.mhsource.com)
- [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- [www.samhsa.gov/cmhs](http://www.samhsa.gov/cmhs)
- [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- <http://www.nysfamilyinstitute.org/>
- <http://www.dbsalliance.org>