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How Can I Help An Older Person Who May Have a Mental Illness?

by Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist, Family Life Education

Even though many persons suffer with a mental illness or disease at some point in their lives, these problems are treatable.

Helpers may find themselves in a position where they:

- deny the warning signs
- worry about what others will think
- wonder who is really to blame

Since any older adult may be vulnerable to developing a mental health problem, it is important that you know when and how to help. When you care about an older person who displays some difficulties, describe the problems to a professional. This trained person, who both you and the older person should trust, can help assess the need for assistance.

When Talking With an Older Person:

- Be honest about your concern.
- State the problem, acknowledging the problem in behavior. You will not be making a diagnosis.
- Be willing to listen. Listening is an important skill. Ask questions.
- Show concern and support.
- Spend time with the person and show you care.
- Talk with someone who might be thinking about suicide.
- Know how to refer a person for professional assistance.

How to Refer a Person for Help

- Listen for signs and symptoms.
- Listen for problems that you cannot help.
- Be aware of agencies and resources in the community.

- Get to know professionals and volunteers in your community.
- Discuss the referral with the person or family.
- Explore the person's or family's willingness to make contact with the community resources.
- Take action if the person or family is unwilling (or unable) to make contact.
    - Call the agency
    - Identify yourself
    - State what the person's needs are
    - Ask the agency what action they will take and what you can do
- try to find out whether the person or family contacted the resource and whether they were helped. Make sure they know you care and that you want them to get the help they need. *Note: Many agencies or services may not be able to offer assistance to a person unless the individual is willing to seek help.*

  Therapy helps to improve the lives of many people, but it is a collaborative effort between you and a therapist in which you must be actively involved. You should feel you can discuss your concerns openly and directly. Your therapist must respect confidentiality and be someone you trust. The therapist will discuss options and treatments but will not tell you what to do. The decisions are always yours to make.

Who Can Help?

Sometimes therapists and religious leaders are biased towards human issues or problems depending on their values, level of conservatism and doctrinal or religious beliefs. They may give you advice that is not sound or helpful. Use common sense when seeking advice and assistance from others. Get several opinions.

Community Mental Health Centers

Community mental health centers are public mental health centers that receive state and local funds to provide mental health services to individuals in their provider area. They have sliding-scale fees and often accept Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance, and private pay. Even though there is a cost involved, your mental health or the mental health of someone you love is worth the investment. Community mental health centers are listed in the telephone book.

Professionals in Private Practice

Professionals in private practice are therapists who provide psychotherapy services as a private business. They include psychiatrists, clinical social workers, psychologists and nurse practitioners who receive specialized training and licensing.

Nonprofit Mental Health Services

These include agencies, such as Catholic Social Services, Family and Children Service Agencies, Jewish Family Services, and Lutheran Social Services are staffed with qualified providers who offer counseling.

Private Psychiatric Hospitals

Private psychiatric hospitals provide mental health evaluation and treatment through inpatient or day treatment programs.

Mental Health Hospital Units

Mental health hospital units provide evaluation and treatment through inpatient and day-treatment programs.

Veterans Administration Hospitals

Veteran Administration hospitals are full-service medical hospitals that may have mental health units.

Pastoral Counseling

Pastoral counseling are religious leaders who may not be adequately trained to provide counseling services. They often provide consultation services and share religious beliefs.

Self-Help/Support Groups

Self-help groups bring together people with common experiences. Participants share experiences, provide understanding and support, and help each other find new ways to cope with problems. Help is available to anyone. When help is needed, it is important to get advice from several sources to determine which will be the best treatment, therapy or counseling for the individual.

If You or Someone You Know Needs Help Please Call:

National Mental Health Association (NMHA), **1-800-969-NMHA;**

National Association for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Helpline, **1-800-950-6264;**

The Center for Mental Health Services Information Line, **1-800-780-CMHS;** or Nebraska Mental Health, **(402) 479-5126;**

Nebraska Mental Health Consumer Help Line, **1-800-836-7660;**

Nebraska State Department of Aging, **(402) 471-4617;** or your local mental health office or community services.

References

A Mental Health Guide for Older Kansans and Their Families, 2000.

Nebraska Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Gambling Services, 2000.

Panhandle Mental Health Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

Panhandle Community Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

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