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## Getting help for someone with a mental illness

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### Summary

- If you are in need of urgent medical attention, call triple zero (000) for emergency services.
  - Encourage the person with a possible mental illness to see a doctor for a mental health assessment.
  - Prepare for mental health crises with specialised training through Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)
  - Try to develop a sense of balance between your own needs and the needs of the person you care for.
  - If someone close to you is having suicidal thoughts, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 for information and support.
  - If you are a young person living with or caring for a family member with a mental illness, call Young Carers on 1800 242 636 for information and support.
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Although there are different types of mental illness and symptoms, family members and friends of those affected share many similar experiences. There is a lot you can do to get mental health help for your friend or relative. However, you need to look after yourself too.

### Mental health emergencies

If you or someone you are with who is in need of urgent medical attention, call triple zero (**000**) for emergency services. If you are on a mobile phone, **112** is another emergency number that will connect you directly to emergency services.

### Getting help early for mental illness

Do not ignore warning signs of mental illness in a family member, friend or colleague. The sooner the person receives treatment, the better the outcome is likely to be. It will help if you:

- encourage the person to see a doctor for a mental health assessment
- make an appointment with the doctor yourself to discuss your concerns and find out what can be done (if the person refuses to see a doctor).

### Being proactive with mental health

Developing a positive attitude will help you to provide better support for someone with a mental illness. It will help if you:

- Find out as much as you can about the mental illness, treatment options and what mental health services are available in your area.
- Recognise and accept that symptoms of mental illness may come and go and may vary in severity, and varying levels of support will be required at different times.
- Contact **Mental Health First Aid** (MHFA) and sign up for specialised training for mental health crises. MHFA can help you to recognise mental illness signs and symptoms quickly and respond the right way in a crisis.
- Develop a sense of balance between your needs and the needs of the person you care for.
- Contact a support group for carers or relatives and friends of people with a mental illness.

### Common reactions to mental illness

The distress associated with having a family member with a mental illness may lead to feelings of guilt, anger or shame. Acknowledging these feelings is the first step towards resolving them. It is important to understand that neither you nor the person with the mental illness are to blame for it.

You can seek additional information from Tandem, the peak body for families and carers of people in

Victoria experiencing mental ill health via their [website](#).

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## Know your limits when supporting someone with a mental illness

You should decide what level of support and care you are realistically able to provide. Explain this to the friend or relative with the mental illness, as well as the mental healthcare professionals involved in their treatment (for example, the psychiatrist or case manager). This will make sure that the type of support you are unable to provide can be arranged in another way.

You should also discuss options for future care with healthcare professionals and other family members and friends. Talk to the doctor or case manager about what types of support are available. For example, the government-sponsored Personal Helpers and Mentors Service (PHaMS) can help the person with their day-to-day life, as well as offering respite care and other support for you.

## Simple ways to help cope with mental illness

It is important to encourage a sense of structure in the life of a person severely affected by mental illness. You can develop plans to cope on a day-to-day basis, such as:

- **develop predictable routines** – for example, regular times to get up and eat. Introduce gradual changes to prevent boredom
- **break tasks into small steps** – for example, discuss with the person what steps would help them with daily self-care
- **try to overcome a lack of motivation** – for example, encourage and include the person in activities
- **support the person to make decisions** – even though it can sometimes be difficult for them to do this and they may keep changing their mind, try to resist the temptation to make the decision for them.

## Dealing with disturbed behaviour

It can be difficult to know how to cope when a family member or friend's behaviour becomes extreme. It is a good idea to try and discuss strategies with the person, and also make contact with healthcare professionals to get advice and support.

### Aggressive behaviour

Aggressive or violent behaviour may be associated with psychotic symptoms, or alcohol or drug abuse. In these situations, it is best to involve healthcare professionals immediately. For aggressive behaviour associated with extreme stress, try to develop an atmosphere that is open and relaxed.

If someone is aggressive, violent or threatening violence, you should report it to the treating healthcare professionals (and the police) immediately. If you live with someone who is aggressive or violent, consider ways you can live apart. It is very likely that living apart will work out better for both of you.

### Drug and alcohol use and mental illness

Alcohol and other drug use can contribute to the development or worsening of mental health issues. If a family member or friend's alcohol and other drug use is of concern, contact **DirectLine** on **1800 888 236** for free and anonymous advice, 24 hours, 7 days a week.

### Self-harm

Self-harm is when a person deliberately injures themselves in an attempt to cope with strong feelings such as anger, despair or self-hatred. Someone who self-harms may inflict physical injuries in a variety of ways such as cutting, burning or biting themselves.

If someone you are with has self-harmed and requires medical attention, get treatment from your doctor or at your local hospital's emergency department.

Find information on dealing with self-harm at the [Suicide Line website](#).

### Suicide

If someone close to you is having suicidal thoughts, talk to them about how they are feeling and discuss why they

might be having these thoughts. You can suggest things to distract the person from the suicidal thoughts. However, if the thoughts persist, especially if the person experiences hallucinatory voices that suggest suicide, inform their doctor immediately.

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or visit the **[Suicide Call Back Service website](#)** for information and support, if someone close to you is having suicidal thoughts.

### **Manipulative behaviour**

Dealing with manipulative behaviour can be an emotional and confusing experience. If someone with a mental illness is demonstrating manipulative behaviour (such as telling untrue stories about mistreatment by the others who care for them), try to establish whether the behaviour is being used to get extra help and support. It is a good idea to involve the person in activities that will make them feel less resentful towards others. Always check out the stories before you react.

### **Dealing with mental illness in the family**

One person's mental illness can affect everyone around them, from friends and family members to colleagues and healthcare professionals. It is important to know that help is available if you need support and advice.

### **Parents of children with a mental illness**

Dealing with your child's mental illness can be very distressing and often it is hard to know what the best approach is.

There are many parenting services available to Victorian parents to get advice, information and resources relating to children and teenagers' mental health. Access one of the following helplines or websites:

- **[Parentline](#)** – call **132289** between 8 am and 12 am for telephone counselling for Victorian parents and carers of children up to 18 years of age.
- **[Maternal and Child Health Advisory Line](#)** – call **132229** to access the 24-hour phone service for Victorian families with children from birth to school age.
- **[The Raising Children Network](#)** – access a complete parenting resource with advice for children of all age groups.

Find more information on the **[Children, young people and mental health](#)** page.

### **Brothers and sisters of someone with a mental illness**

Brothers and sisters can be a great source of support for people living with mental illness. If your sibling has a mental illness, you can help by:

- talking honestly about your feelings and encouraging others in the family to do the same
- being active in improving mental health services, for example, through local mental health support groups
- avoiding making the person with mental illness the axis around which the family revolves
- maintaining your focus on living and enjoying your own life.

If you need to talk to someone, start by talking to your family and friends about how you are feeling. If you would rather speak to someone you do not know well, try talking to your school counsellor or local doctor.

For free counselling and mental health information contact the **[Kids Help Line](#)** on **1800 55 1800**, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you are living with or caring for a family member with a mental illness, call **[Young Carers](#)** on **1800 242 636** or visit the website for information and support.

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

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