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## Caring for someone with mental illness

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### Summary

- Get as much information as you can about the illness through websites, forums and community mental health support groups.
  - Look after yourself by setting time aside to pursue activities that you enjoy and spend time with loved ones who are not affected by the situation.
  - Be aware of your own safety when caring for someone with a severe mental illness. If you ever feel threatened or unsafe, it is important that you remove yourself (and any children) from danger straight away.
  - Call the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) for details of mental health support groups and other mental health services for family carers in your local area.
  - Contact Centrelink on 13 27 17 or Carelink on 1800 052 222 to find out about government benefits and services for family carers as well as for people experiencing mental illness.
  - Call Carers Australia on 1800 242 636 to get details of local carers associations and their services
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Taking on the role of caring for someone with a mental illness is a big commitment. It can be very emotionally and physically demanding, but it can also be a rewarding experience. To give the person you are caring for the best chance of recovery it is important that you find out how to support someone with a mental illness, get as much information as you can about their illness, be open and honest with them at all times, and most importantly, look after yourself.

### Useful mental health carer strategies

When you take on the role of being a carer for someone with a mental illness it is a good idea to think through what is involved and how it will affect your life. Do some research into the type of mental illness and research the different kinds of mental health treatment available. Talk to others who have cared for someone in a similar situation and think about the type of emotional, financial and practical support you will need. There are mental health assistance programs that can assist you.

In order to provide good support to the person you are caring for, try to:

- talk openly and encourage them to be honest with their friends and family about how they are
- read about the mental illness from reputable websites, such as government or health organisation websites or books by specialists
- encourage them to take an active role in their mental health recovery, get out and see people and enjoy a healthy lifestyle
- set limits and let them know what you can do for them and what you are not able to provide
- find out about any local or online training courses for mental health carers
- join a mental health support group to meet other people in a similar situation
- take any talk of suicide or self-harm seriously and speak to a mental healthcare professional about it as soon as possible
- put plans in place as a back-up in case you go on holiday, have to leave town or you are not able to care for them for any reason.

Find more useful information in the [\*\*SANE Guide for Families\*\*](#).

### Good communication and caring for someone with a mental illness

As a carer you need to communicate with the person you are caring for as well as their friends, family, healthcare

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professionals and medical administrative staff. You will want to make sure these interactions are as stress-free as possible.

Family and friends may want to be regularly updated on the person's condition, medication and living situation, while the person may want more privacy than that. As a mental health carer, it will be your job to manage these conversations and keep the stress levels down as much as possible.

### **Caring for someone having a mental health crisis**

Coping with crisis situations with someone suffering from a mental health issue can be overwhelming. It can be hard to know what will help and what will make the situation worse.

When someone is having a mental health crisis, they could be feeling suicidal, experiencing severe anxiety, reacting to a life problem or having a psychotic episode – or a combination of all these symptoms.

There are some simple strategies that will help you connect with the person in distress:

- introduce yourself calmly and clearly
- explain why you are there
- be polite and non-threatening but also be honest and direct
- listen to what they are saying in a non-judgmental way
- avoid confrontation
- ask them what they see as the main problem
- do not attempt physical contact, except to prevent serious assault or suicide attempts
- encourage them to talk to a mental healthcare professional
- follow up difficult experiences with counselling for yourself.

See the [Urgent help for mental illness](#) page.

### **Caring for a parent with a mental illness**

Having a parent with mental illness has its own challenges and stressors and it's normal, particularly if you are young, to have all kinds of different feelings. You might be feeling angry, confused and alone. If you are a young person helping to care for a parent with a mental illness, it is important that you also look after your own needs and can still manage day-to-day activities such as going to school and meeting up with friends.

You might find it helpful to find out more about mental illness and how to cope with a parent who has mental illness. There are lots of websites with resources, helplines and also services that provide or can link you into support groups where you'll meet others with similar experiences.

You can access most of these resources and supports for free. Also, if you need to talk to someone, you can call **Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800** at any time on any phone for free.

Above all, remember that you're not alone. There are over a million young people in Australia who live with a parent who has a mental health condition.

### **Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI)**

For a large selection of resources to help families, children and young people understand and respond to the needs of a parent with mental illness visit the [Children of Parents with a Mental Illness](#) website.

### **Families of Parents with a Mental Illness (FaPMI)**

In Victoria, the [Families of Parents with a Mental Illness \(FaPMI\)](#) program has coordinators located in a large number of adult clinical mental health services. These coordinators work with mental health services and other providers to ensure families where a parent has a mental illness are well supported.

FaPMI also runs:

- peer groups – such as CHAMPS (Children of Mentally Ill Parents)
- PATS (Pay Attention to Self) programs for children and young people aged 8 to 18 years
- SKIPS (Supporting Kids in Primary Schools) mental health promotion program – information sessions about FaPMI for primary schools.

To learn more about FaPMI, or to find out if there is a FaPMI coordinator you can talk to in your area, visit the [Bouverie Centre website](#) where you can locate the FaPMI coordinator contact details.

### **Young Carers Network**

[Young Carers Network](#) has information that is targeted to people in different age groups, as well as professionals.

### **Looking after yourself and caring for someone with a mental illness**

Being a carer for someone with a mental illness can be emotionally and physically demanding. Sometimes the burden can become too much. To make sure you do not burn out, set aside time to spend with friends and family who are not involved, and do things that you enjoy, like gardening, going to the movies or exercising. If you are in good spirits and feel refreshed, you can provide better support for the person you are caring for.

If you are going through a difficult time with the person you are caring for, talk to your friends and family about it. Often, just by talking things through, they become clearer and less overwhelming. If you are concerned about the person's privacy, talk to a healthcare professional instead. They will be able to advise you on useful strategies and further mental health support services.

It is important that you know your limits. Be clear about what you can take on and how available you can be. It is better to be a consistent and stable support rather than someone who is available all the time but very stressed.

### **Support for carers of people with a mental illness**

If you are looking after someone experiencing mental illness it is important to remember that you are not alone. There are government and community programs that provide support, counselling, respite care and advice.

Get in touch with mental health support services across Victoria and online for advice from healthcare professionals, access to information and resources, and to find out about patients' rights. Carer support services include:

- [SANE Helpline](#) – call 1800 18 SANE (7263) for details of support groups and other services for family carers in your local area
- [Centrelink](#) – call 13 10 21 to find out about benefits and services for family carers as well as for people experiencing mental illness
- [Carers Australia](#) – call 1800 242 636 for details of local Carers Associations and their services
- [Commonwealth Carelink](#) – call 1800 052 222 for details of government services for people with a disability and their carers
- [Tandem](#) - representing families and carers of people living with a mental illness.

### **Caring for someone with a mental illness – staying safe**

Be aware of your own safety and trust your instincts when caring for someone with a severe mental illness. If you ever feel threatened or unsafe, it is important that you remove yourself (and any children) from danger straight away. You can always call emergency services from somewhere else if you need to get help.

For more information about staying safe when caring for someone with a mental illness, see [Getting help for someone with a mental illness](#).

### **Financial and in-home mental health support**

If you are looking after someone with a serious mental illness, there may be times when getting to work is difficult. You may need to be at hospital during the week, stay with the person through the night, or be around to monitor their medications. The state and federal governments have a range of financial and home support options for

people who need help while they care for someone.

Find more information on the [Financial support for carers](#).

### **Housing and accommodation**

The person you are caring for may be staying with you at home or it may be up to you to help find accommodation for them. Help is available for people in need through a [number of government programs](#).

### **Where to get help**

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your psychiatrist
- Your [local community health centre](#)
- [Parentline Victoria](#), call 13 22 89 (8.00 am to midnight, 7 days a week)
- [Young Carers Network](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation of Australia](#) (Victoria), call (03) 9826 1422
- [Carer Helpline](#), call 1300 550 265 (9.00 am – 5.00 pm)

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