



How Do You Help Someone With Mental Illness Who Doesn't Want Help?

This question has been asked by many people. If you are asking it too, you are not alone.

Why is it so hard to make a loved one with a mental illness accept that they have one, and what can be done about getting them to realize that they need treatment? These questions have been asked by many people, hundreds of times. If you are asking them, too, you should know you are not alone.

According to Xavier Amador, clinical psychologist and expert on mental illness and family relations, it is partly because it is human nature that we don't accept weakness or major challenges that need help. But the nature of mental illness also makes it difficult to grasp the reality of the problem and how it is affecting one's family and loved ones. This, of course, can be the source of a great deal of tension in family relationships and friendships.

This guide is intended to provide some tips for those who wish that their loved one would "recognize and accept" their mental illness. This is not a substitute for professional or legal help.

While figuring out what to do and what may work is not a linear path, nor a predictable one, these tips may help in communicating with and better understanding your loved one. Start with listening, not an easy task and something you probably feel you have already done. See if you are able to try it with a fresh perspective. Be a patient listener. Listen to your loved one's problems. Put yourself in his or her situation to gain a better understanding of what he or she may be going through.

Listening Guidelines

1. Set time aside to be able to talk to your loved one without getting distracted.
2. Create a stress free environment like going on a walk or having coffee together.
3. Sometimes the person may not say anything at all to you or say a lot that doesn't make sense, but keep listening so that he or she knows you are there for him/her. This helps build trust.
4. If your loved one refuses to take medicine or see his doctor say something like, "I hate to see what you are going through. Tell me why you are scared or against taking your medicine?"
5. Try to understand if your loved one thinks that medication will cause her mind to get weak or develop any short and long term problems. Or perhaps it is the embarrassment or stigma of taking medicine.
6. Try not to display any strong emotions like anger or frustration. For example, if your loved one is talking about hearing voices or believe he is being possessed by someone, for the moment just listen and reassure him that it must be hard for him to go through this in his mind.
7. Let your loved one talk as long as she wants to and do not interrupt her; rambling can help a person release frustration. The trick is not to try to guide the conversation.
8. Repeat what the person says. When you have made a point of communicating your understanding of what she has said, you ensure that you have understood her correctly and convey empathy. When it is your turn to talk, repeat what she said in your own words; if your loved one feels you understand her thoughts and feeling on a specific matter, she will be more open to hearing your opinion later.
9. Make a note. Record what you have learned about your loved one's inner life and emotions.

Is your loved one in danger?

If you believe your loved one is dangerous to himself or others or you are concerned for his safety, there are legal procedures in Virginia that can compel your loved one to get treatment. To learn more about the process: review our Guide to Civil Commitment Process, call 911, or call the Emergency Services Unit at your local Community Services Board (local public mental health provider). Note- if you call 911, explain that you are calling about a loved one that has mental illness and is in psychiatric crisis. Request a Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) responder.

Get support for yourself

Sometimes the best thing you can do is get support for yourself, especially from others who have “been there”. Talk to a friend or family member, or someone you trust who will be sympathetic to what you are experiencing. Join a support group through a local NAMI affiliate. Find one at www.namivirginia.org or call 1-888-486-8264.

Additional Resources

I Am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help, by Xavier Amador (Book)

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Treatment Advocacy Center

SAMHSA: What A Difference A Friend Makes

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law