

What a Difference a Friend Makes



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Imagine that you've just been diagnosed with a serious but treatable physical condition. You're scared and confused, so you tell a friend. How would you feel if your friend laughed, called you names, made rude gestures and told you to just snap out of it? People with mental illnesses face these reactions every day. We all know better than to hurt people - especially when they're already hurting. Mental illness causes physical, mental and emotional symptoms that make an added stigma even harder to bear. So put aside any preconceived notions you might have about mental illness and embrace a more helpful way of relating to people.

Instead of blowing off a person's worries, express your interest and concern. Don't change the subject when a mental illness diagnosis comes up - ask questions, listen to ideas and be responsive. Ask what you can do to help. If other people make insensitive remarks, don't ignore them - educate people so that they understand the facts about mental illness. If somebody with mental illness applies for a job or an apartment, don't discriminate. Treat people with mental illness just as you would those with any other serious but treatable condition: with respect, compassion and empathy.

Help a Friend

If your friend tells you he or she has a mental illness, you might also want to respond in any or all of these ways:

- Express your concern and sympathy.
- Ask for more details about the person's diagnosis and how he or she is managing. Really listen to the answers and continue the conversation. Make sure your friend understands that you honestly care.
- Ask what you can do to help. You can leave this open-ended, or you can suggest specific tasks that might help your friend in his or her specific situation. Rides to medical appointments (or keeping the person company in the waiting room) can ease some of the anxiety and reluctance that people feel when faced with a life-changing diagnosis.
- You might also offer to help your friend with errands, but be careful not to patronize or make the person feel disempowered.
- Reassure your friend that you still care about him or her, and be sure to include him or her in your everyday plans—going out to lunch, catching a movie, taking a jog. If your friend resists these overtures, reassure and reinvite without being overbearing.
- Remind your friend that mental illness is treatable. Find out if he or she is getting the care he or she needs. If not, offer your help in identifying and getting the right kind of care.

If a friend is having a psychiatric emergency, ask them what kind of help they need and respond immediately. It is important to give them hope and encourage them to seek support.

Suicide is one of the most frightening possible outcomes of mental illness. If you or someone you know needs help, call 1.800.273.TALK (8255) immediately. This is the number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a 24-hour service available to anyone in need of help. Never ignore or underestimate remarks about suicide. Take them seriously, and make certain that the person in crisis is cared for. And if you think your friend is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone—stay there and call 911, the local mental health crisis team or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.TALK (8255). Immediate medical attention is also in order if somebody you care about is very weak or ill from an eating disorder.

From SAMHSA, "What a Difference a Friend Makes" campaign. Visit their website for more information including videos. <http://www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov/index.html>. NAMI March 2016; Updated March 2017