



MI Fact Sheet Series

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

Collaborating with professionals for the best outcomes

Achieving the best outcome for your family member with mental illness is most easily achieved through constructive relationships with service providers. In light of the difficulties often surrounding the experience of mental illness, this can be a challenge.

The following can be helpful:

- Consult with the treating team or service about what you can do to provide the support your relative needs and to support the work of the service.
- Learn as much as you can about the particular service type and how it functions (eg. be clear about the role of the local crisis/emergency treatment team, called by various names in different states - CAT, ACIS, MIT, PET or On-Call team). Clarify how a particular service sees its role and its approach to treatment. It may also be helpful to understand its approach to working with families and the person with a mental illness.
- Offer any information that seems relevant. Where necessary, keep records of medication, side effects, sleep patterns, positive symptoms, and behaviour patterns you feel are important.
- Plan your questions and what you want to say. Ask specific, factual questions that focus on gaining knowledge, eg. What can I do to help my relative? What are the side effects of the medication? What alternatives, if any, are there?
- Be familiar with confidentiality policies and learn about what rights you have to information under your local Mental Health Act.

- Pitch your requests within the boundaries of these policies. Be willing to be pleasantly assertive in order that these policies are enacted. Seek support from family support services and carer support agencies where necessary.
- Be factual and clear in your conversations and avoid covert messages ('Don't tell him/her I told you...'); give examples of specific behaviours (My husband has stopped taking medication because he hates the side effects. Last time this happened...).
- Request meetings to help with communication. You might also consider writing follow-up letters that document the agreements that were made in the meetings for the treating team and perhaps your relative too.
- Remember to thank people for their time and effort. Mental health professionals work in difficult circumstances and are rarely adequately acknowledged for their efforts.
- Recovery from illness will take teamwork with your relative, the professionals and you. Try to keep this in mind and work to achieve positive relationships.

Communicating with crisis/emergency/on-call teams

Each state and territory in Australia has some form of on-call team to help deal with crisis situations, called by various names – Crisis Assessment and Treatment Service (CAT) (VIC and ACT), Assessment and Crisis Intervention Service (ACIS) (SA), Crisis Service (NSW), Mobile Intensive Support Team (MIT) (QLD), Psychiatric Emergency Team (PET) (WA), and on-call

team (NT). Effective communication with these services during periods of acute illness will reduce stress and assist to achieve effective treatment.

Presenting the issues

How you present the issues, or describe your situation when seeking support from the crisis teams, will have an impact on how you are received.

Tips for effective communication at this time include:

- Describe the previous diagnosis (if any) and current symptoms in the language used by the mental health system if possible. Describe the positive symptoms (hallucinations, delusions) and their content if possible, any suicidal thoughts or actions that may have been taken, and any thoughts of harming other people.
- Tell the crisis team about medication – has the person stopped taking his/her medication and how long ago?
- What was the medication?
- Explain your experience of the illness in the past, eg Last year he stopped his medication and two months later became psychotic and paranoid. This has started to happen again.
- Describe any danger involved – it is best for people to be prepared rather than having to respond on the spot. The crisis team notifies and elicits the support of the police if necessary.

In some cases, families and people with mental illness are not successful in their endeavours to get what they consider the appropriate support and treatment by a

crisis response team. To move forward, it is important that you understand why treatment has been denied and what else you can do. Enquiries about the following issues may be helpful:

- Why has treatment been denied – is a crisis team response inappropriate for the symptoms?
- Are the symptoms not severe enough?
- If so, what would indicate that it was severe enough?
- What should you do in the meantime? Are there other services that could be appropriate?
- With this information in mind you can decide on further action to be taken. If treatment or assessment is denied and you continue to think that it is necessary, consider the following strategies:
 - If possible, call the mental health service at non-crisis times. This allows you to think more clearly, relay the symptoms and describe the situation in a calm manner. It may then be possible to develop a plan that you are able to put in place over time. By doing this the local mental health services team is alerted to the issues and can build a picture of your situation. It might reassess its involvement.

- Consider visiting your GP. They are able to make direct referral to mental health practitioners and to crisis teams if necessary.
- Consider taking the person to an Emergency Department of a general hospital.

If you are unhappy about the service you have received from the Mental Health Service

- Document your experiences to date
- Request a meeting with the professionals/service involved
- Request copies of their complaints procedure
- If the issue is still unresolved you may consider taking further action. This might involve stating your complaint in writing to the following people:
 1. The Director of the Area Mental Health Service
 2. The Chief Executive of the general hospital which has responsibility for the Area Mental Health Service
 3. Health Services Commissioner
 4. The Chief Psychiatrist
 5. Your local member of state parliament

Useful references

- Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au
- Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
www.mifellowship.org
- Mental Health Services Website (Vic)
www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth
- National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)
www.nami.org
- Mental Health Council of Australia
www.mhca.com.au
- SANE Australia
www.sane.org
- Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia fact sheets

The mental health service delivery framework

What can friends and family do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Family and carers supports and services

Effective communication



Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
08 8221 5072
www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of Sth Australia Inc
08 8221 5160 www.mifsa.org.au

NT Assoc of Relatives & Friends of the Mentally Ill Inc (NT ARAFMI)
08 8948 1051 www.ntarafmi.org.au
Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc
02 9879 2600 www.sfnsw.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
03 8486 4200 www.mifellowship.org
Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc
07 4725 3664 www.mifnq.org.au

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc
07 3358 4424 www.sfq.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc
08 9228 0200 www.mifwa.com
Canberra Schizophrenia Fellowship Inc
02 6205 1349