THE AMBULANCE STAFF CHARITY

Caring for those who care for us

Coping as a carer in five steps

By David Snelders Adv Dip MCBT

"I love him but nothing I do fixes anything for long enough. I sometimes daydream about running away. Then I feel guilty – how could I think that if I love him?"

Diana lives with and cares for her brother who has a mental illness. She has a job, friends =and a busy lifestyle, but underneath it all she's struggling, and nobody around her knows how much.

"He needs me – there's nobody else. At times, I need somebody too."

Powerlessness. Fear. Frustration. Just three emotions that you're likely to feel if you're in the same position.

Watching a loved one suffer is an extreme test. Whether the person is injured, addicted to substances or harming themselves, your natural response is to want to take away the pain.

If it's a mental illness that's the cause of the suffering, your feelings can be in even more turmoil. Strange, unpredictable behaviours can be terrifying and confusing. While you're the one who's there, supporting them, listening to them and helping whenever you can, you're the one who's attacked verbally, or even physically.

It's not surprising if you feel afraid, sad, grief-stricken, angry – and then, of course, guilty. It's impossible not to worry about the future and as you struggle with each episode, you feel anxious and even overwhelmed.

Are you covering it up? Do you worry what other people will think if you try to explain what's happening? If so, you're not alone. Because of the stigma that's attached still to mental illness, many people in your position feel that they can't open up about it. This can increase your isolation and leave you no way to get the information and support that you need.

Yes – the support you need, you can't help anybody if you don't look after yourself.

Here are five steps you can do to make sure that you stay strong, calm and well:

Share it

You'll find enormous relief from sharing your thoughts and feelings in a supportive environment among those who understand. TASC is here to help you with this; you don't have to suffer in silence.

Read up about mental illness

What is your loved one's condition? How does it affect them and what are their treatment options? What tools, strategies and tips have others used to deal with it in their lives?

Accept reality

While you can offer valuable support and love, you cannot cure your loved one's mental disorder. Their symptoms may get better or they may get worse. Always speak to your GP as medication can help to restore stability and functionality – although it may not heal the condition. Be prepared to lower your expectations of what your loved one can do. For instance, they may only be able to work part-time or, in some cases, not at all.

Set boundaries

Especially if you feel resentful of your loved one's erratic behaviour. This is a clear sign that you're giving too much. Find a way to get a break from the situation. If the behaviour is physically or verbally abusive, you need to take a zero-tolerance approach. As hard as it is, consider if you need to leave the situation or make other arrangements for support and care.

Take heart

We're getting better at understanding and treating severe and chronic mental illness all the time. People get better and learn how to cope effectively. Relapses may happen, but they become rarer and shorter. There is hope!

Being there as a support and carer for someone who's suffering with a mental illness will be your greatest challenge. While they may not ever completely heal, you can learn how to manage the stress of the situation by looking after yourself.

About the author

David is a qualified counsellor and a counsellor for TASC. He is also a member of the Royal Society for Public Health and an executive member of the International Institute for Complimentary Therapists.

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