



# How Families can Help

If a family member (or friend) struggles with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, substance use problem, or any other psychiatric condition, what can you do to help?

- 1. If the family member or friend hasn't sought help already** - help them to do so. This might involve making phone calls to set up appointments with providers, taking them to those appointments, and so on.
- 2. Learn more about the person's diagnosis**, the signs and symptoms of their disorder, and about mental illness or substance abuse in general. There are reliable sources of information online - good examples include the American Psychological Association (APA), National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), the National Association of the Mentally Ill (NAMI), and major medical centers (such as the University of Michigan Health System and Mayo Clinic). The University of Michigan Health System's Depression Center offers family education nights, generally twice a month.
- 3. Learn more about the treatment(s)** your family member or friend is undertaking, and what you can do to be helpful.
- 4. Ask to be included in a family session.** While there might be certain circumstances in which this may be inappropriate, often joining your family member or friend for a session with their therapist and/or psychiatry provider can be useful. The provider can provide specific information about ways they think you can help - or ways in which you might not be helping. At times, you may be asked to attend most sessions across the course of treatment and be substantially involved, especially if you are a client's caregiver.
- 5. Develop strategies to cope with challenging situations.** There may be times when your family member or friend shows strange or challenging behaviours that can make you feel confused, helpless, embarrassed, or scared. This can happen in public or in private. It's best to talk with your family member's care team for specific strategies to manage challenging situations. Here are some tips:
  - Learn more about your options.
  - Plan the best strategies for the situation.
  - Understand that this is not personal.
  - Realize that some behaviours may be beyond your loved one's control. They may be as distressing to them as they are to you.
- 6 Know what to do in a crisis situation.** If you believe that a loved one is at risk of harming him/herself or others and he/she won't seek help, you may need to seek emergency help - such as calling the police. In general, laws let a doctor, judge, or police officer order an evaluation if a person meets certain criteria. While this can be a helpful tool in a crisis situation, it can also be difficult and traumatic for everyone involved. Ideally, a loved one should have a plan in place that seeks action before these emergency measures are necessary.
- 7. Examine your own feelings.** It's very common to experience a mixture of feelings - compassion, worry, and frustration among the most frequent ones.
- 8. Take care of yourself.** It's very true that trying to help another person can take a toll - make sure to take time for yourself.
- 9. Seek support if you need it.** This might be in the form of a support group (such as NAMI), or even seeing your own therapist if you need to.