

Caring for Yourself When Someone You Love Has a Mental Health Problem



If your loved one has a mental health problem, it's natural to want to help them feel better. They may even ask you directly for support.

As a caregiver, you might feel stressed, exhausted, or confused about how to help. You might even believe you should sacrifice your own health for theirs.

If you feel this way, you're not alone. One in 5 people in the U.S. faced a major mental health challenge in the last year. And 1 in 4 caregivers of people with mental illness have depression.

What are some ways to feel healthier?

One way to be an effective caregiver is to make sure you're taking care of your own health. You'll be more able to handle the challenges of supporting your loved one. Taking time for yourself, even a few minutes every day, will help you recharge.

To improve your mental health:

- **Find a balance.** Decide how you can and can't help your loved one. Let them know what to expect.
- **Take time for yourself.** Don't give up your interests and hobbies.
- **Practice good mental habits.** Your feelings are still valid. Be sure to notice positive moments in each day.
- **Talk with a therapist.** Search [online](#) in your area.
- **Build a support network.** Talk with friends, family, and other people you trust about how they can help you. You can also join a [local support group](#) or find [online support groups](#).

To improve your physical health, focus on:

- **Exercising.** Daily exercise reduces stress.
- **Sleeping.** The right amount of sleep will lead to making better decisions.
- **Relaxing.** You can try deep breathing, meditation, and muscle relaxation.
- **Eating well.** Stay away from processed foods and high amounts of sugar.

How can your loved one help you?

Your loved one may not always be able to make decisions that support their recovery. Try to find a more stable time when they're not in crisis to discuss the future.

One tool that may help you both is called a psychiatric advance directive (PAD). Your loved one can make decisions about their treatment ahead of time in case they're unable to make them later on.

A PAD has 2 parts:

- **Advance instruction.** Your loved one might include:
 - Where they'd like to be treated
 - Health conditions or allergies that healthcare providers need to know
 - Who should care for them

- Who is allowed to visit them
- What medicines or types of treatment they prefer
- Who to contact and who not to contact when they are not well
- Any child-care instructions
- People who can help with bills, pet care, etc.
- What to tell their employer
- **Healthcare power of attorney.** Your loved one chooses a trusted person who will make treatment decisions for them. This person is also called their healthcare agent. They may need to be contacted by healthcare professionals if there's an emergency or mental health crisis.

When you create a PAD, you can choose to use 1 or both parts. The PAD will go into effect if a healthcare provider or psychologist finds that your loved one is unable to make decisions based on their condition. This condition could involve:

- Being unconscious
- Being catatonic (can't move or speak)
- Mania (extreme excitement)
- Psychosis (extreme mental confusion)

State laws vary with PADs. You can learn about your state at nrc-pad.org.

While you can play a key role in helping your loved one feel better, it is vital to take care of yourself along the way. Remember, your ongoing support will improve their chances of recovery as well.

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