

Your Crucial Role as a Family Caregiver

Caring for loved ones with mental and/or behavior disorders By **Nancy Lewin**

People are finally starting to talk about family caregiving, to realize what an important contribution is made by these selfless individuals. We all know someone who cares for an aging parent, spouse or sibling with Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia, Heart Disease, Diabetes or Cancer. It has become acceptable to discuss the stress as well as the joys of caring for a loved one with a recognizable disease. But what is less spoken-about is mental illness. It is time to recognize, celebrate and offer help to all those who care for a friend, co-worker, or loved one with mental illness or behavioral disorders.

The National Institute of Mental Health states as their mission: "Reducing the burden of mental illness and behavioral disorders through research on mind, brain, and behavior." There are many types of mental illness and behavioral disorders, from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder to Bipolar Disorder to Depression to Eating Disorders. And there are many tools available to those who experience these health issues. However, mental illness and behavioral disorders are discussed less often than one would think. Terms such as Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, Panic Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder - as well as Autism Spectrum Disorders - are becoming more mainstream, yet few of us understand what these terms really mean.

In addition, we rarely think about the toll left on the person caring for someone with mental illness. People are starting to grasp how difficult it is to care for a loved one with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia. But unless you have lived through it, you cannot always comprehend the tremendous stress associated with caring for someone with mental illness or behavioral disorders.

For example, over two percent of the American population lives with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). There have been wonderful breakthroughs in treating this condition, and medication, therapy and behavior modification can be very helpful. So the person afflicted with OCD has many options to help them live a happy, productive life. But if the person with OCD is having trouble controlling their symptoms, it may be very stressful to the family caregiver - and the caregiver may feel too guilty to mention their stress to a health professional. People feel guilty "complaining" about their loved one's behavior, just as they would feel guilty complaining if their loved one soiled a diaper or slipped in the bathtub.

People with OCD often ask multiple questions of their caregivers - sometimes hundreds per day. They may call

their loved one constantly. The person who has never experienced this may not understand that this can be so stressful that it can actually cause physical illness in the family caregiver.

This type of stress can be found in those caring for loved ones who have other mental illness. It is not something most people are comfortable talking about, even with their doctor or close friends. Luckily there are resources to help you when you find yourself stressed and seemingly unable to find a solution to your loved one's behavior disorders or mental illness:

Reach Out. www.helpstartshere.org is a wonderful website produced by the National Association of Social Workers. Social workers have training in this area and may be of real benefit to your family.

Don't Feel Guilty. Don't blame yourself for feeling sad, angry or depressed over your loved one's condition. There are many good stress-reduction books, journals, CDs and other resources out there.

New Remedies? Talk to your loved one's doctors, nurses, and managed care organizations. Each year new medications and behavior-modification programs are introduced. Alternative medicine may be helpful in some cases. Massage therapy, Traditional Chinese Medicine, yoga and energy healing may be beneficial, especially when paired with Western medicine.

Take Care of You! As you learn about all of these new treatments, see if any are useful for you! You yourself might find comfort from yoga, breathing techniques or behavior modification. Your insurance plan or managed care organization may cover some of these tools.

The Best Way for You to Deal with the Situation: Sometimes you just don't have the answer. Using the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder example, are you better off just answering fifty questions - if it doesn't take long and puts your loved one at ease - or should you try to help your loved one manage their condition? Are you making things worse, or better? You may not know, and it may not be possible to figure out the best solution by yourself. Which leads us to:

Resources - The National Institute of Mental Health website has great information: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>. So do National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org and Mental Health America: www.nmha.org.

Nancy Lewin is the Director of www.strengthforcaring.com - Johnson & Johnson Consumer Products Company