



Talking to Individuals and their Families About a New Diagnosis: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals

Individuals who have a new diagnosis of serious mental illness (SMI) may respond in a variety of ways. For some, it may be a relief to finally have a diagnosis that explains the symptoms they have experienced for some time. For others, it can be traumatic and difficult to accept.

Whether someone experiences an initial onset of symptoms or they experienced several years of symptoms before a determination was made, a diagnosis can create fear, confusion, and uncertainty about the future. The stigma that accompanies a diagnosis may also make them reluctant to engage in a meaningful way to develop and follow a treatment plan.

Mental health professionals play a pivotal role in supporting individuals and their families with how to understand, accept and manage a new diagnosis. You can provide accurate information to help someone in your care understand that their diagnosis is important. Keep in mind that how you present that information can impact their view of the future, of themselves, and their engagement in overall treatment. It is vital to be thoughtful about this process.

Understanding Someone's Response to an SMI Diagnosis

You may receive a barrage of questions when you introduce a diagnosis. This is a common and very understandable reaction. During this conversation, it is important to demonstrate empathy and convey hope. As a clinician, you may have seen many cases of SMI – yet it is likely that this information is entirely new to individuals and family members when they receive a diagnosis.

Whether someone is experiencing a mental health crisis or hearing a diagnosis for the first time, they may need help to cope with all the stress it involves. Empathy and compassion are essential components. As you explain the expected course of symptoms and evidence-based treatment options, focus on the optimism of treatment. Emphasize that while there is no cure, there is recovery. Consistent treatment can greatly improve symptoms and allow a person to work towards their goals. When people work with their treatment team to understand options and tailor the best approach, it can also reduce the likelihood the severe symptoms recur.

It can be helpful to share that mental health conditions are similar to other chronic physical illnesses. Any diagnosis is no one's fault. Mental illnesses are brain disorders. As with any health condition, it is important to center the discussion on recovery and quality of life.

What can I expect next?
How will this change
my life?
What are the best
treatment options?

Building a quality, therapeutic relationship that encourages participation in treatment is the foundation for effective, lifelong management of serious mental illness.

You begin building effective therapeutic rapport at the moment you meet an individual and their family. The first step is to listen. Active, empathetic listening can help someone feel heard and validated as they process and come to terms with a new diagnosis.

When you consider their perspective, it can help shed light on what treatment approaches may be the most successful. Listen for and identify personal strengths and previous health successes.

Questions to ask:



What's one major health or other challenge you've successfully managed in the past? What helped you through that challenge?

What's your strongest personal attribute? How can you use that strength to benefit your mental health?

A consistent, trusting therapeutic relationship can help individuals feel more comfortable about involving a loved one in treatment or recovery. As their ally, you can help provide education and support and offer to share it with family on their behalf. This can help someone more easily start or navigate a difficult conversation with family members.

- ✔ Offer to include loved ones and encourage family involvement as you work together with the individual to develop a treatment plan.
- ✔ As you consider how family can be supportive in treatment, look to understand the individual's interdependence and ability to care for themselves. The impact of mental health conditions can often be a source of strain. They can create tension and significant changes to family dynamics.

When you share outside resources, information and support, it can help someone begin to be their own advocate and find management tools that work for them. In order for them to understand the complexities of how to cope with disorders of the brain (e.g., mental illnesses), it requires new knowledge and skills, and often additional supports.

- ✔ Direct families to resources like NAMI Family to Family, NAMI Basics, or the SMI Adviser Individuals and Families website. These resources can help guide them through the initial shock and move toward treatment, advocacy, and a better understanding of their diagnosis.
- ✔ Help them connect to licensed mental health professionals for behavioral therapy options. Provide a list of names and numbers with steps they can take for self-care as they await an appointment.

A key to successful treatment adherence is building a sense of autonomy. Personal preferences and views matter as people explore choices and make treatment decisions. When someone feels that they have a better sense of control over their health, they are more likely to maintain treatment and develop positive, long-term health habits.

- ✔ Explain the importance of overall wellness as you develop a plan together. Highlight the areas they have control over, such as self-care, nutrition, physical activity, setting personal goals, developing and maintaining supports, and other efforts to maintain and improve health.
- ✔ Ask them to keep a journal of symptoms and track how well they manage the symptoms. Have them include approaches that work best, current medications, their efforts for self-care, and any questions they think of between appointments. This can help them make the most of each clinical visit.

Talking to Family Members

For various reasons, some individuals will not have family members present during appointments. Some individuals may deny you the ability to talk with family members due to embarrassment, geographical distance, or existing family strain.

However, circumstances and dynamics change over time. You should ask at intervals about family involvement. Medication and therapy may open the door to restoring relationships and result in family members becoming more engaged in decision making, support, and treatment adherence. Family members frequently want to be involved in their loved ones' care and can be a valuable source of support and social connection.

If the individual waives confidentiality and grants permission, their family member may be involved through a collaborative care model. You can:

- ✔ Define the central clinical issue
- ✔ Directly involve the individual and their family member in the treatment plan and discussion of care, which provides a tangible opportunity for support
- ✔ Share in the decision-making process around treatment options and next steps

If the individual refuses to waive confidentiality, navigating the family relationship can be challenging.

It is paramount to protect confidentiality, yet you can still support family members when you:

- ✔ Provide information on resources and local services that don't require client permission
- ✔ Recommend they develop a checklist of practical supports and family resources, and include an emergency plan in the event of a crisis
- ✔ Refer them to a mental health professional or support group outside of the treatment team

Not all individuals who have SMI require caregivers. Yet for those who do, keep in mind these important details when you speak with family members who are caregivers. It can be a stressful responsibility. When someone cares for a person who has SMI, it changes day-to-day routines and can also change life's overall trajectory. Plans, finances, and new worries can quickly become overwhelming and difficult to manage.

As you have honest but hopeful conversations, remember to assure family members that it is vital to practice self-care and seek support for their own health and well-being. Other recommendations and points to share include:

- ✓ Their loved one's mental illness is not their fault
- ✓ Suggest connecting with a family support group, as shared experiences can lead to shared strengths
- ✓ Seek therapeutic support from a licensed mental health professional to help balance the burden and provide insight into best approaches with a loved one
- ✓ Create a plan for reassurance and improved sense of control: be prepared for an emergency, talk to a financial advisor, develop weekly schedules, and plan time for self-care

The Importance of Hope

Mental health recovery is centered on empowering individuals to find and use tools to manage their mental illnesses in healthy ways. People can regain and maintain hope when they discover – or rediscover – their own strengths and abilities.

When people participate in planning and build personal autonomy in their treatment choices, it can provide a sense of control over one's health and renew a sense of self-efficacy and purpose in life. It can help them feel confident enough to reengage socially and lead a more active, fulfilling life.

Families are also an important source of hope and optimism for the future as they support their loved ones and help improve recovery. Whenever possible, treatment plans should include approaches that make the most of both individual and family strengths.



Success in even seemingly small areas can improve recovery and boost optimism.

Mental health professionals who understand the importance of a quality therapeutic relationship can foster hope and have a strong impact on recovery. This is important, as an outlook of hope can dramatically reduce fear, shame, and unnecessary stigma. It can help individuals and families remember that they are not their diagnosis; they are just managing one.

Additional Resources

NAMI [Mental Health Education](#) classes

NAMI information and support for [Family Members and Caregivers](#)

[NAMI Family Support Groups](#) in locations across the United States

[My Mental Health Crisis Plan](#) – an app from SMI Adviser that empowers individuals to help guide their treatment preferences during a mental health crisis

SMI Adviser's [Knowledge Base](#) for Individuals and Families offers guidance and information on SMI, including treatment options and [family engagement in treatment](#)

SMI Adviser's [Mental Health in the Criminal Justice System](#)

[Telehealth](#) information and resources from the Department of Health and Human Services