

NAMI Homefront Mental Health Resources

for Military Service Members, Veterans and Their Families

Guidelines for Offering Empathy

- **Support instead of criticizing.** People experiencing a mental health crisis are very vulnerable. When we criticize them or make negative remarks, we take advantage of their vulnerability and exert power over them through force. This contrasts with our goal to help meet their immediate needs and support them on their way to recovery. As part of our work, it's critical that we respect and protect their self-esteem. Frame any recommendations in terms of what benefit we believe they may bring, rather than what we think the person is doing "wrong."
- **Encourage instead of punishing.** The most effective way to help people start a beneficial behavior is to respond empathetically to their experience, validate their perspective, find a shared goal, listen to their ideas and suggest our own. When we follow this process and genuinely share ideas and concerns, the person will be internally motivated and will trust us more. This is the most effective way to encourage long-term change. Influencing people through intimidation or punishment is coercive, unethical, and leads to more conflict and worse outcomes. Family members have direct experience with this. Joe Talbot, a parent quoted in Patricia Backlar's book, *The Family Face of Schizophrenia*, said:

"With this disease there is no fighting. You may not fight. You just have to take it and take it calmly. And remember to keep your voice down ... [Also] punishment doesn't work with this disease. Now that I have lived with a person with schizophrenia, it makes me very upset when I see mental health workers try to correct their clients' adverse behavior by punishment, because I know it doesn't work."
- **Reward positive behavior and ignore negative behavior.** Studies have shown that people will want to behave in ways that bring them recognition and approval. Research has demonstrated that criticism, conflict and emotional pressure are highly correlated to relapse. It's better to simply wait and ignore negative behavior, if it is not actively dangerous, than to react to it or focus on it.
- **Recognize and accept all the person's symptoms.** It can be tempting to try to "fix" someone's symptoms because they may resemble intentional behaviors. It's critical that we remember that lack of motivation in a person with depression is a symptom of their condition and not something we can counteract or make go away, except for, possibly, through an effective treatment plan. We can't argue with someone's psychotic delusions or deflate someone's grandiose self-image when they're having a manic episode. These aren't social behaviors — they are medical symptoms that can be addressed through a variety of treatments. Instead, offering support and empathy can relieve the person's guilt and anxiety and make treatment more possible.

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Guidelines for Offering Empathy (continued)

- **Patiently encourage independent behavior.** Ask your loved one what they feel they're ready to do. Plan small steps that have a better chance for success. Make short-term plans and goals and be prepared for changes and pauses. Progress requires flexibility. Family members and providers will sometimes need to let go of the standards by which they measure progress and listen more to how the person measures progress. It can be harmful to the person with the mental health condition to have unrealistically high expectations, but patience and waiting can be healing.

Be aware that someone with a mental health condition may be anxious that when they show signs of improvement, their support system will withdraw, and they'll be in greater risk. Reassure your loved one that you'll be interested in and supportive of them even when they're not in crisis — and then make sure that you are.

- **Maintain basic expectations and healthy boundaries.** Like with anyone else, we can expect reasonable, basic behaviors from people with mental illness. Everyone has a better chance of co-existing well when expectations for behavior and cooperation are clear, so we must be sure to express ours.
- **Validate the emotional content of what our loved ones express.** Being empathetic often involves listening and responding to the emotional truth of what someone is expressing. We may not agree with the details or ideas they're sharing, but we must recognize and express the validity of their emotional response to their experience.

For example, if someone says, "Everyone in this house thinks I'm a failure," we can validate what they're feeling without agreeing with the idea. We can say something like, "It must be upsetting to think we're disappointed with you. That sounds painful." This shows we've listened carefully, gives them a chance to clarify any misunderstanding, and demonstrates that they can trust us with how they really feel. Once we build trust like this, we can start to clarify how we see the situation and find things we agree on as we move forward.

- **Have empathy for ourselves.** We aren't superheroes, and many things are outside of our control. A loved one may not have the outcomes we'd like, or they may seem stuck in a difficult stage for a long time. It's admirable to do our best to help improve the well-being of our loved one, but we can't guarantee what exactly that will look like. We must be compassionate toward ourselves and our limits.

Learn More

To watch an engaging animated video about the difference between empathy and sympathy, search YouTube for: **Brené Brown on empathy.**