

BeST Tips: Supporting Families and Friends and Responding to Their Concerns During COVID-19

A message to loved ones of those living with a serious mental health condition: Anxiety about the current situation with COVID-19 is a normal human response. Much is still unknown, and the unknown is a scary place for many of us. However, for those living with anxiety or serious mental health conditions, the impact that COVID-19 has on them can be substantial. Increased stress and anxiety are to be expected. How we – as mental health providers, family members, and friends – respond can make a significant difference in your loved one’s mental health and wellness during this time.

TURN DOWN THE NOISE

Psychosis is an experience in which information and stimuli in the environment can become overwhelming to an individual. The individual likely has difficulty discerning what information is deserving of attention, and in return everything feels important. This creates a great deal of “noise” and chaos in your loved one’s brain, making it difficult to make sense of incoming information and how to respond appropriately. With constant information and discussions about COVID-19 surrounding us, it makes an already overwhelming amount of information even more overstimulating to your loved one. Consider **turning down the noise surrounding COVID-19 in the home**. It is important to stay informed while being mindful of the impact that the healthcare climate can have on a loved one living with a psychotic condition. **Be aware of what your loved one is being exposed to in their environment**. For example, is having the news on triggering your loved one? What is an alternative way you can stay up to date to limit exposure to stress-inducing content? Engage the person in other regular activities that will pull them away from media and conversations filled with COVID-19 content. Go for a walk. Watch their favorite movie. Listen to a music streaming station that does not have commercials. Prepare a meal together. Find calming ways to engage in meaningful activities and conversations wherever possible.

RESPONDING TO BIZARRE THOUGHTS

When you are faced with questions or thoughts from your loved one that seem to be confusing or strange, or if it appears that your loved one is having a disproportionate reaction to the current situation, do not argue against these beliefs or ideas. At the same time, we do not want to agree with or reinforce them. Try addressing the feeling underlying the odd content. For example, if your loved one appears fearful that this virus is a government conspiracy to end the world, try responding with “I see you’re feeling very afraid right now. Tell me what I can do to make you feel safer. Let’s come up with a plan together.” **We will not be able to convince your loved one out of a belief; however, we can support them during a time of distress**. Also to note, we must be mindful that the current state of things with COVID-19 may be reinforcing or “feeding into” pre-existing beliefs and concerns your loved one is already experiencing. Again, we want to be sure to **acknowledge and empathize with the feeling underneath the thought, rather than focusing on the content of your loved one’s belief**.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

While looking out for the safety of your loved one, it is imperative that you are caring for your own health and safety needs. We understand that your loved one living with a serious mental health condition is likely to be under a great deal of stress at this time. However, it is important that we are aware of all the additional stressors each of us are facing – from limitations on work which can lead to financial strain, to difficulties with childcare for children who are not in school, to your own inability to engage in regular activities that help you de-stress (such as going to the gym). During this time, be sure to consider your own stressors and ways in which you can adapt to current circumstances. Also remember that **support is here for you, too, during these difficult times**. (See “Helpful Contacts” and “Helpful Links” below.)

BEING PROACTIVE

It is important that we are aware of the impact increased stress and anxiety can have on an individual living with schizophrenia or other psychotic disorder. **Be proactive by being prepared with a plan** should your loved one need additional assistance during this time. Please contact your loved one's local mental health agency as soon as possible (or visit their website) to learn about the current status of mental health appointments, as well as what to do should a psychiatric emergency occur during this time. Find out what the agency, hospital, jail, or prison recommends for receiving ongoing updates about appointments, visitation, transportation, and their current operating policies, procedures and status – including the local emergency department's recommended response to psychiatric emergencies. Be sure you know who to call for information and emergencies. If you are unsure, ask your local mental health board or the provider agency. Contact your local mental health agency, mental health board, or National Alliance on Mental Illness chapter for additional guidance. Phone numbers to gather now (do not wait for an emergency) include: the crisis line, the mental health agency's crisis team (if applicable) or mobile crisis, and the local emergency department. (See also "Helpful Contacts" below.) When calling 911, be sure to request that an officer with specialized training in mental health (known as Crisis Intervention Team/CIT trained officers) be dispatched to the emergency. **Be prepared when making a crisis call.** Information to have prepared might include the following (where applicable): your loved one's diagnosis, medications, substance use, current distressing situation, history of suicide attempts, history of psychosis, history of violence or aggression, what triggers your loved one, current threats, access to a weapon, and what (if anything) has worked for your loved one in the past.

We also understand that this is a time of increased stress for you as family members and friends of an individual living with a mental health condition. Existing concerns seem to be at a heightened level as you worry about your how loved one will fare during COVID-19. Consider **who might be able to assist you** in supporting your loved one during this time of increased stress. Who might you be able to call for additional support should a crisis occur? In addition, it may be that you are **temporarily unable to visit** inpatient settings or your loved one's residence to see that your loved one is safe. Be sure to speak with the hospital, group home, jail, or prison to get their recommendations and preferences on how to receive updates about your loved one, as well as their current policies for visitation and communication. If you support and care for an individual not living in your home, physical distancing might inhibit your ability to engage in regular interactions with them. It is important to plan ahead for other ways to communicate, engage, and check in. Consider how you will assess if your loved one needs additional assistance and options regarding your loved one's medication management (if applicable).

To note, it may be important to remind or educate your loved one about the importance of physical distancing as it relates to other chronic health conditions – either your health condition or theirs. This is especially true for those who are higher risk of contracting COVID-19 based on their age or medical comorbidity.

BE PREPARED, BUT AVOID PANIC

Remember, it is as important now as ever to be prepared, but do not panic. **Your loved one's mental healthcare team is here to support and assist.**

Virtual Support:

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

NAMI Greater Cleveland and NAMI Summit County can be a resource to you and your loved ones, including during this time of physical distancing. Now offering virtual support groups! Virtual groups will follow NAMI guidelines, policy, procedures, and protocol – but instead of meeting in person, meetings will be over the phone or via Zoom.

NAMI Greater Cleveland:

[NAMI education programs](#)

For additional information about NAMI Greater Cleveland, contact:

support@namicleveland.org or call (216) 875-7776. Or visit [NAMI Greater Cleveland](#)

NAMI Summit County:

[NAMI support group meetings](#)

For additional information about NAMI Summit County, contact:

info@namisummit.org or call (330) 252-1188. Or visit [NAMI Summit County](#)

Helpful Contacts:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: 741-741

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Treatment Referral Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): For additional information, visit [NAMI](#) or contact the HelpLine at (800) 950-6264

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Ohio: Get help now by calling 1-800-686-2646. For additional information, contact namiohio@namiohio.org, or visit [NAMI Ohio](#)

Helpful Links:

For coping with your own anxieties during this time:

[“Seven Science-Based Strategies to Cope with Coronavirus Anxiety”](#)

You are not alone during these uncertain times:

[NAMI: “COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Information and Resources”](#)