



A new concrete tool for family members and friends

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Context

A concrete tool that encourages communication between the individual with mental health problems, his or her family and friends, and health and social services network workers.

The *Information and support guide for families and friends of individuals with mental health problems*¹ was launched May 14, 2012, during the Annual Mental Health Days in Montréal. This document is the product of two years of exceptional collaboration between community organizations and partners of the health and social services network. A dissemination plan allowed copies of the Guide to be distributed throughout Quebec. It is also available for free download on the IUSMQ website (www.institutsmq.qc.ca). The Guide is in line with primary mental health care concepts that promote community-based care and services provided by less specialized resources, in order to better address the population's needs². It was developed together with families that are part of community organizations.

This tool is also intended for mental health care providers who wish to continuously improve their knowledge and skills, and provides them with valuable information about the real needs and concerns of an afflicted individual's family members and friends. In short, it is a concrete tool that encourages communication between the individual with mental health problems, his or her family and friends, and health and social services network workers.

Moreover, the Guide offers practical advice regarding the appropriate attitudes to adopt, as well as the limits family members should establish to provide more effective care and avoid a living in a downward spiral of distress. Here are a few excerpts from the Guide (p.21-24).



Excerpts from the *Guide*

Take care of yourself

"It is common for caregivers to burn out. That's why they need to care for themselves – it's easy for them to forget their own needs! Learn to recognize signs of stress and fatigue and to set your own limits. It is difficult to help someone when you are exhausted..." According to a study, 60% of caregivers are subject to three times more emotional distress than the general population³. It may be helpful to suggest that family members and friends consult the "Avant de craquer" website at www.avantdecraquer.com for guidance on how to react, take back control of their life and seek help from the nearest care provider.

Stay informed

"Learn to make the distinction between the signs of a difficult day and symptoms of the mental health problem... Knowing the symptoms, causes, and treatments of the illness can help you recognize the difference". Several websites, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association website, provide information about mental disorders (<http://www.cmha.ca/>).

Define your role

"You are not the physician, social worker, or nurse of your family member or friend... Seek help for yourself to find out how to develop "caregiving" attitudes so that you can, in turn, help your family member or friend".



Family members and friends can be active partners in the recovery of afflicted individuals

Believe in your family member or friend and her recovery

"The person you are caring for is endowed with her own intelligence and personality, and can do things at her own pace, based on her values and priorities... Don't act in her stead". As care providers, we help family members and friends support individuals with mental health problems, and encourage the active participation of said individuals in society as engaged citizens, in view of providing better care and promoting recovery. The purpose of the Guide is to encourage a great number of people in the community to actively participate in the recovery of their family members and friends, and it gives them the tools they need to do so.

Set aside time for yourself

"Continue your normal activities and set aside some time to care for yourself. Divide household chores among other family members. Do an activity you like and that makes you feel good. Enjoy life!"

Don't blame yourself or feel guilty

"Be realistic about your expectations to avoid disappointment... You are not responsible for what is happening to that person".

Don't remain isolated

"Seek out help and an understanding ear. Confide in people you can trust... Contact a mental health association dedicated to families and friends for support and information". A list of resources available to help families with a loved one suffering from a mental problem is included in the Guide (see www.ffappam.com). We encourage family members and friends to make use of these specialized resources.

Don't feel ashamed

"Don't feel ashamed to say that a family member or friend has a mental health problem. This is the first step in the battle against prejudice. Keep in mind that one in six Quebecers suffers from one form or another of mental illness".

Don't give up hope

"Hope will be rekindled when you realize that your role is to care for your family member or friend along the road to recovery and not to heal her or act in her stead".

A bookmark for mental health care providers has also been created, to help increase their awareness about the importance of developing an alliance with the family members and friends of an individual with mental problems. They can be active partners in the recovery of afflicted individuals, since they witness firsthand the daily evolution of their condition. This text aims to encourage the development of a collaborative relationship between professionals and families^{4,5,6}, as well as between community organisms and partners of the health and social services network. The Guide (currently downloadable on www.institutsmq.qc.ca) may soon become a reference tool systematically given out to family members and friends presenting themselves at a mental health access service, (GASM – guichet d'accès en santé mentale) with an individual suffering from a mental health problem.

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