

# HELPING A SPOUSE WHO HAS A MOOD DISORDER

SOURCE: KANSAS AMI NEWSLETTER. MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO (MDAO)

It can be very difficult for families and friends to help someone who has a mood disorder. You are concerned about your loved ones but often feel frustrated, fearful, and yes, even angry, as you attempt to deal with your loved one's condition.

The following are suggestions of how to cope and assist your loved one if they are experiencing a mental illness:

1. **The mental illness your spouse suffers affects your entire family.** Keep remembering and reminding others that it is nobody's fault. It is an unfortunate illness.
2. **Remember that you are only human. You cannot fix your spouse's illness.** There is nothing you can do to make him or her well, so don't feel compelled to try. What you can do is be supportive and loving and handle the everyday details and practical issues of life that he or she cannot cope with at that time.
3. **All members of the family have a responsibility to cope with the illness.** Escape is not a helpful way of dealing with crisis. You all need each other.
4. **Knowledge is power.** Educate yourself concerning every aspect of the illness and the treatment options. Ignorance just encourages anger, fear, and prejudice while education brings compassion.
5. **Find social support.** Dealing with a mood disorder in your family can be very lonely and isolating. Your friends simply cannot understand what you and your family are going through. Make sure you find sources of social support in your community.
6. **Maintain your own identity.** Resist becoming consumed with your spouse's illness. You have an obligation to yourself and your children to take care of yourself and meet your own needs. You must all continue to develop your own interests and talents. You are a valuable human being so don't play the martyr role and sacrifice yourself.
7. **Try to create a safe environment** for the spouse to express himself or herself without feeling threatened, constrained, or condemned. Your spouse desperately needs a nurturing, safe place to express the incredible frustration he or she is feeling about their illness.
8. **Help your children understand the illness as much as their age allows.** Share your feelings and keep no family secrets! Don't deny them the opportunity to learn about the illness and the unfair stigma attached to it and to develop their own skills for coping. It can be an incredible learning opportunity for them. If they need facts to help them understand the illness and their own feelings toward it, get information for them. And remember that small children, by their very nature, assume that they are responsible for anything that goes wrong in their environment.
9. **Be your spouse's advocate with the medical professionals;** become assertively involved in his or her treatment and medications. If the psychiatrist won't cooperate with you, demand a different one! Treatment should involve the entire



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Page 1





family, so find a professional who will work with the whole family. You know more about your spouse's illness than anyone else. Trust your instincts.

10. **Encourage your partner to be self-sufficient.** Realistically assess what your spouse can and cannot handle; then compensate assertively. Some people with mental illness cannot handle money, certain household chores, or time commitments. You must not do things for your spouse that he or she can do for themselves. Don't rob them of their dignity.
11. **Use touch.** Use non-sexual touch to encourage your partner. Hugging, holding, and massage can all be strengthening and calming for your partner.

12. **Develop and maintain marital rituals.** Doing things together daily can help strengthen a marriage through depression. Five classic ways to maintain a sense of closeness include: doing daily chores together, making plans, talking about common daily concerns, planning rituals, and recreation time.
13. **Develop a crisis plan.** Talk to your loved one about what will happen in the event of a crisis, under various circumstances. Put the plan in writing.
14. **Always hope for healing.** Remember that mood disorders are treatable illnesses. They are sometimes cyclical so sometimes the going will get tough. Sometimes you will feel overwhelmed. Just remember that the right treatment is out there. Stay optimistic, for you and for your loved one. And never forget ... you are not alone.

