

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Helping Friends and Family Identify and Address Mental Health Concerns

Mental illness can strike at any time. It can be hard to know whether a friend or relative's behavior is just a result of a difficult emotional phase, or a signal of mental illness. Stigma can also make talking about these issues difficult. But turning a blind eye to a mental health concern could deprive someone you care about of the support and care they might want but are unable to ask for.

Warning Signs

Spotting the signs of mental illness is not always easy, but common signs of distress can include:

- Unprovoked emotional outbursts
- Obvious personality changes
- Problems coping with daily activities and challenges
- Major changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Difficulty making decisions, concentrating or remembering things
- Extreme anxiety

Reaching Out to a Loved One

You've noticed something is wrong but are uneasy and unsure of how to talk about it. Remember that early intervention speeds the recovery process. Here are some ideas about approaching this delicate subject:

Showing Concern

Your loved one may feel shame, guilt, fear or confusion. Pick a calm, quiet time to broach the topic and gently express your concern. "I'm worried about you and want to help," or, "I've noticed that you seem anxious, are you alright?" are possible ways in to the conversation. Actively listen to any response without interrupting or making any judgmental comments. Letting loved ones know you've got their best interest at heart creates a more caring and secure environment.

Suggesting Resources

Investigate services in the area that may be able to help. Providing relevant information can help ease anxiety over finding support services. Advocate groups and government initiatives have helped to remove much of the stigma of mental illness and there are now more employee assistance programs, hotlines, and online information sites than ever. It's also a non-threatening way to leave the decision in loved ones' hands, encouraging them to explore mental health support options when they're ready to do so.

Offering Help

While you may not have the expertise to directly help others cope with mental health issues, your emotional and physical presence can be invaluable. From drives to the doctor, to a shoulder to cry on, to making a favorite dish—the little things you do to support your loved one can go a long way on the road to recovery.

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Talking about the issue of mental health with someone you suspect may be at risk can be difficult, but there are more resources available and greater public understanding than ever before. It’s up to all of us to actively play a role in reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. Take the time to stop and think about your own attitude and behavior in relation to mental illness, and encourage others to do the same. Tread carefully, offer information and support, and let the person know that you’re there to help, not judge.