



MI Fact Sheet Series

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

Be loyal to wellness

By Sandy Jeffs

The following is a personal reflection by Sandy Jeffs on what is helpful to her when she is in a psychotic state. (From 'Developing Carer Skills' by Sandy Jeffs – poet, writer, woman living with schizophrenia).

What do I expect my carers to do when I am unreaching and unreachable?

My carer base has never been my family. It is a collection of friends, some being primary carers and another group of close friends who have a wide range of roles and accept a wide range of responsibilities for me.

Broken leg analogy – If I was lying in the driveway with a broken leg and was yelling 'Don't touch me! Leave me alone!', my friends would try to help. They wouldn't leave me. They would assess the situation, intervene by treating me themselves or calling for an ambulance. They would be clear in their own minds that treatment would be needed and more than likely, most of the world would agree that action had to be taken. They do it for the person who used to play hockey or tennis or whatever.

My friends take action and initiate treatment for me because of the sane person they know and who mainly returns to them when well. Back your judgment and even if you feel as though you are doing the worst possible thing for your loved one, and fear their resentment and anger, do whatever you have to. Be loyal to wellness. Don't be loyal to illness. This may mean calling a Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT), and sometimes having the person you love committed as an involuntary patient. Familiarise yourselves with the system and have plans and back up plans in place to deal with circumstances arising. Know your region. Have at hand relevant telephone numbers and names of any persons who may be able to support you.

My carers have to know my two responses: my sane response and my mad response. It is my sane response, the well me, that keeps my carers going and which gives them incentive. They are helping a sick sane me. It is important for my carers to have a belief in their own sanity and to have the confidence to distinguish between the two sides of me. Equally important is the notion that I need my wellness affirmed.

It is important for my carers to have support from wherever they can get it. It is important for my carers to protect themselves by trying to have lives, or a portion of their lives, that are separate from me.

What are the ongoing skills, the day to day skills needed to deal with me? I ask the impossible! I ask that my carers maintain an equanimity while I hurtle off on a rollercoaster journey, oscillating between varying degrees of wellness and illness. I know it is completely unreasonable and selfish to demand that they provide a stable background upon which to base my unstable life.

Do not enter into any delusional thoughts I might be harbouring. Always present a gentle but firm affirmation of reality.

While trying to normalise me, my carers accept that sometimes some of my responses are not normal and may cause unwanted difficulties. This means coming to grips with the limitations set by mental illness which are dreadful and difficult and possibly impossible for any human being to do. As some people say, shit happens and this is the rotten reality.

Learn to read the signs that something is not quite right.

Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
www.mifellowship.org

Mental Health Services Website (Vic)
www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill
(NAMI) (USA)
www.nami.org

Mental Health Council of Australia
www.mhca.com.au

SANE Australia
www.sane.org

Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia fact sheets

What can friends and family do to help
a person experiencing mental illness?

Family and carers supports and services

Understanding psychosis

Understanding schizophrenia

Understanding bipolar disorder

Understanding depression

Understanding schizoaffective disorder



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