

GENERAL POINTS FOR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Psychological problems are often seen as "all in the mind", weakness, or a sign of self-indulgence. This is not true. Intelligent, creative, generous and strong-willed people are affected. Millions of ordinary people, with jobs, relationships, families and friends, suffer every year. Mental disorders are real and can have a devastating impact on lives. In some cases – such as depression and anorexia – they can lead to death. In all cases there may be implications for long-term physical health.

There are many treatments for psychological problems and mental disorders. Sometimes they can seem rather long-winded or hit-and-miss compared with some of the common remedies for physical illness (like a plaster-cast or a course of antibiotics) but the outcome is often excellent. Even where all the problems cannot be solved, the sufferer may learn to manage their symptoms much more effectively, with a corresponding improvement in quality of life for themselves and others.

Living in misery is unpleasant and should be avoided. For some illnesses – in particular where people get depressed or start to lose touch with reality – the quicker they get effective help, the better the outcome is likely to be.

Spouses, partners, family members and friends can all offer great help and support through psychological difficulties. However, doing so can be frustrating, difficult, exhausting and depressing. You must look after yourself. You cannot help anyone else if you don't.

In some cases, a helper's main role should be to get their loved one professional care as soon as possible. In all cases the next best thing is just to listen. You may think you're great at it, but it's becoming something of a lost art in modern society. Being there with someone, just hearing what they have to say, without judging, evaluating, or trying to fix things for them, is the most healing influence of all.

Be alive to differences, particularly in terms of the way people communicate. It's very easy to expect everyone to experience everything the way we do ourselves. Unless people are very disturbed, allow yourself to enter their world. It may be more interesting and rewarding than you think. Just make sure you can return when you need to.

As well as softness and empathy, you need to provide firmness and dependability. Do what you say you're going to do. Be honest, even if it takes courage. Know your own mind and don't give a sufferer the responsibility for making everything in their world – including you – feel OK. Deal with your own suffering.

At some point you may need to deal with the difficult and unwelcome thought that *you may be part of the problem*. Be open to the idea. If you find it difficult to countenance, even as a distant possibility, it may well be true.

If your friend or loved one is in therapy, it is fine to encourage them to talk about the process and what they may be discovering. However, you should also respect their privacy if they are reluctant to do so. The therapy room needs to be a place where clients can say anything they want: to try out ideas that are new and may seem uncomfortable. It would be very inhibiting to feel they had to go home and repeat the whole conversation. Emerging ideas can be rather tender. Let the client decide what they wish to share.

Many "significant others" often seek help, including counselling and psychotherapy, when their loved ones are in therapy. Sometimes this is because they realise they *are* part of the problem. Sometimes they choose to because the other's problems have left them anxious or depressed. Sometimes it is because the other is changing, and those changes bring up issues for those in relationship with them. Sometimes it is because their significant other seems to be getting so much out of it that they'd like something similar for themselves.