



Coping with a Loved One's Mental Illness

Witnessing the suffering of a loved one can be one of the most difficult situations we face. Among other things, we may feel powerless, frustrated and frightened. That's true whether the suffering originates from a physical illness or injury, addiction or self-destructive activity.

When a loved one suffers a debilitating, persistent and chronic mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, those feelings can be compounded. Strange, unpredictable behaviors can be terrifying and confusing. Your loved one may suddenly rage at you with blame or be utterly dependent upon you for basic needs and emotional stability.

You may experience many confusing emotions yourself, including anger, grief, guilt, fear and sadness. As you struggle with each episode of illness and worry about the future, you may feel anxious and overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, since serious mental illness still carries a stigma, you may be keeping it a secret, resulting in increased isolation, frustration and difficulty because you may have no one to talk to about your feelings or no way to get information and support.

How to Help Yourself

When you're in the middle of a chaotic or confusing situation, taking care of yourself can be the last thing you think of, yet, it is crucial. According to NAMI, the National Association for the Mentally Ill, here are a few ways to do that:

Educate yourself about mental illness. Read everything you can about your loved one's condition, its treatment options, as well as tools and strategies for coping with the illness and minimizing relapses. NAMI has a wealth of

written and audio material, as well as 1,200 local U.S. chapters.

Seek support. You do not have to suffer in silence. NAMI offers free support groups for loved ones as well as a HelpLine: 1-800-950-6264. You can find enormous relief from sharing your thoughts and feelings in a supportive environment among those who understand.

Accept the reality of the situation. While you can offer valuable support and love, you cannot cure your loved one's mental disorder. His or her symptoms may get better or they may get worse. Hospitalization may be necessary. Medication can restore stability and functionality, but may not heal the condition. You may have to lower your expectations of what your loved one can do. For instance, he or she may only be able to work part-time or, in some cases, not at all.

Set boundaries and clear limits. If you feel strong resentment, you are giving too much. If you need a break from the situation, find a way to get it. Don't tolerate violent behavior. As hard as it is, consider if you need to leave the situation or make other arrangements for care.

Don't lose hope. Advances in our understanding and treatment of severe and chronic mental illness occur every day. People get better and learn effective ways to cope. Relapses can become less common and shorter in duration.

While your loved one may never completely heal, and coping with the situation may challenge you like nothing else, it is possible to learn how to manage the stress of the situation as you care for your loved one as well as yourself. ✧

10 Ways to Have the Best Holidays Ever

The holiday season will soon be upon us. And with it will come the hope that this one will be truly magical. Here are 10 ways to bring that about.

- 1. Give yourself a break.** Perfection—even perfect happiness—just isn't possible. Let your best be good enough.
- 2. Make conscious decisions.** Get clear about what *you* really want to do over the holidays before compromising with others.
- 3. Shorten your to-do list.** If an item doesn't add to your holiday spirit, scratch it off.
- 4. Say no when you want to.** It's very liberating. Try it and see.
- 5. Limit obligatory activities.** If you can't avoid certain events, limit the time you're there.
- 6. Take care of yourself.** The old standards help keep stress at bay: eat healthfully, exercise, make time for relaxation and fun.
- 7. Start early.** To avoid a last-minute frenzy that can bust your budget, start shopping or making presents now.
- 8. Ask for help.** Preparations shouldn't fall upon one person. Be specific when requesting help.
- 9. Establish new traditions.** If you have experienced a major life-changing event, such as a death or divorce, consider doing something you've never done before over the holidays.
- 10. Get support.** If a glorious holiday season feels completely out of reach, you may experience the holiday blues. Reach out for the support you need. ✧

A Letter From

Maggie Freeman, LCSW, CEAP



When someone you love has a severe mental illness, caring for that person as well as yourself can feel like an impossible task. Just coping with each episode of the illness can feel completely overwhelming and confusing. Yet, as the article on page 1 reveals, it is imperative that you get the education and support you need.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, the subject of the page 3 article, is an anxiety disorder that can develop after witnessing or experiencing intensely traumatic events. PTSD is a serious condition, but it is manageable with treatment. The article explores how to recognize the symptoms of PTSD and ways to get help.

Stress is not nearly as serious as PTSD, but it still can exact a toll on your well-being. Luckily, as the article on page 4 reveals, there's an easy and effective way to reduce stress: be creative. And don't think you have to be an artist to be creative. Anyone can bring creative expression into his or her life and work.

Also in this issue, the quiz asks how well you handle your Inner Critic, and the Top 10 suggests ways to make the approaching holiday season the best you've ever had.

If you have questions about the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this season bring you greater happiness and peace of mind.

How Well Do You Handle Your Inner Critic?

Most of us have an Inner Critic, an internal "voice" that judges our actions or inaction, tells us what's wrong with us and how we should or should not be. This constant judgment can lead to debilitating feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety. While it's difficult to silence the critic completely, there are ways to cope with it. Answer these true/false questions to discover how well you handle your Inner Critic.



True False

Set 1

- 1. I can't seem to do anything right. I feel depressed and incapacitated by the constant nagging, judging voice inside me.
- 2. I don't necessarily realize I'm at the effect of my Inner Critic, but I often compare myself to others and never quite measure up. I feel inadequate.
- 3. Just when I'm about to embark on something new and exciting, such as a job or relationship, my Inner Critic kicks up doubt and fear to prevent me from pursuing the opportunity.
- 4. I have difficulty staying in the present moment because my internal judging voice loudly intrudes, dictating what I should and shouldn't do.
- 5. Because of that voice, I second-guess my choices and actions and don't trust myself. As a result, I worry that I'll make a big mistake and something bad will happen.

Set 2

- 1. I see my Inner Critic as a misguided ally who wants to help or protect me. I look for the positive intention behind what it says and embrace that rather than the negative message.
- 2. I've gotten to know the themes my Inner Critic harps on, so I can distinguish those voices from other more useful internal dialogue.
- 3. It's helpful to notice when my Inner Critic is present. I breathe deeply and center myself to release fear and anxiety and return to a more peaceful place.
- 4. Giving my critical inner voices funny names and descriptions—such as Taskmonster or Paula Perfectionist—helps me diminish their power and not take them seriously.
- 5. As I've become skilled at handling the Inner Critic, it bothers me less often. I still hear it sometimes, but I don't believe what it says and it rarely affects me adversely.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to learn some effective ways to handle your Inner Critic. Please call if you'd like support in exploring this further. *

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Ernesto just returned from Afghanistan where he witnessed an improvised explosive device (IED) destroy a Humvee in his convoy, killing his best friend. Now that he's back home, he's no longer the easy-going guy he once was. He has angry outbursts at the slightest provocation and uses illegal drugs to repress his wartime memories.

When Liz was seven years old, her stepfather sexually abused her. Now in her thirties, she wants to put the past behind her but can't. She's unable to establish intimate relationships and has frequent nightmares about her abuse.

It may not appear that Ernesto's wartime experience has much in common with Liz's sexual abuse, but it does. As a result of the trauma they've each experienced, they both now suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

What Is PTSD?

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that affects individuals who've experienced firsthand (or witnessed) intensely traumatic events. Stressors known to cause PTSD include: violent personal attacks such as assault, physical and/or sexual abuse, rape, mugging or murder; car, plane or train accidents; military combat; captivity; and natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes or earthquakes.

Although most experts agree that 1 in 10 children and adults has PTSD, not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will develop the condition. Experts are uncertain as to why some people suffer from PTSD while others, who've experienced similar trauma, do not.

How Do You Know if You have PTSD?

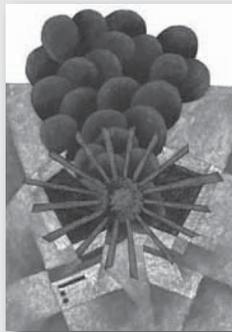
Symptoms of PTSD can occur months or even years after a traumatic event and typically fall into three categories:

1. Avoidance/Withdrawal. You tend to avoid activities, situations or people that remind you of the trauma. As a result, you may withdraw from friends, family and activities you once enjoyed. You may have a partial or total memory lapse of the traumatic event. For example, Ernesto rarely leaves the house and refuses to let his wife, Maria, go anywhere alone. His heightened state of alert, trying to protect her as he feels he failed to do with his best friend, has meant increased isolation for the couple, as Maria gives in to his fear.

2. Reliving the Experience. You have frequent and vivid memories of the traumatic event. Your recurring nightmares, flashbacks or hallucinations are triggered by certain images, smells and sounds. You may experience anxiety, difficulty concentrating, agitation, outbursts or fatigue.

3. Emotional Numbness. You may "check out" emotionally to avoid situations that might trigger painful emotions. As a result, you may have a difficult time experiencing and expressing emotions or maintaining intimate relationships. For example, Liz both craves and fears intimacy with a significant other and, as a result, has had a series of one-night stands. This allows her to feel connected physically, but means she avoids experiencing, and ultimately coming to terms with, the painful feelings associated with her trauma.

People with PTSD may also experience: Substance or alcohol abuse; difficulty finding and/or keeping a job; physical symptoms such as headaches/migraines, breathing irregularities or tightness in the chest; insomnia; increased risk of depression; and suicidal thoughts.



Coping with PTSD

Although there is no "one size fits all" treatment for PTSD three successful options are:

Seek professional help: Therapy can help you to reinterpret how you react to your experiences. Discovering what makes you afraid or upset is the first step in finding ways to replace old, harmful thoughts and feelings with new ones that more accurately reflect the situation.

Support groups: Communicating and sharing traumatic experiences with others who've had similar experiences helps you process and work through feelings of anger, guilt and fear. Symptoms may never completely disappear, but sharing thoughts and feelings in a structured, safe environment helps manage them while building self-confidence and trust.

Self-care: Scheduling time to reflect on the trauma rather than allowing a constant flow of worrying thoughts helps to manage symptoms. As well, living a healthy lifestyle that includes eating healthfully, exercising and getting adequate sleep can help you recover. Yoga and massage can also be helpful.

PTSD is a serious condition. If you recognize the symptoms in yourself or a loved one, seek treatment right away. *

Relieve Stress Through Creativity

Jessica is a high school English teacher. Her job entails stressful interactions with administration and students in addition to the pressures of lesson planning and grading.

On days off, she prioritizes creative pursuits. She makes collages out of artifacts from world travels to Turkey and South America. She takes dance classes. Photography provides another way to untangle her mind from the pressures of daily teaching work.

Jessica says that creativity gives her a chance to play—to do something where the stakes are low and there's no judgment. "Without these creative outlets I would be a lot less fun in the classroom and less open to the whimsical creativity of my students," she says. "I'd definitely be more stressed out and wouldn't enjoy teaching so much."

As Jessica's story shows, in a fast-paced world, creativity can be a fantastic stress relief tool. Whether we make collages, plant a garden, toss paint onto a canvas, or play the

guitar—stress tends to go out the window when we let our creativity run wild.

Why Incorporate Creativity into our Daily Lives?

According to Ruth Richards, author of *Everyday Creativity*, creativity is necessary and attainable for everyone. It is "one of the most powerful capacities we have, bringing us alive in each moment, affecting our health and wellbeing, offering richness and alternatives in what we do, and helping us move further in our creative and personal development."



Exploring, experimenting, playing and entering the unknown—through anything from travel to taking an improv class to cooking—are all ways to practice creativity. You can also incorporate creativity into the workplace, finding ways to add spark and delight to otherwise mundane activities. For example, give yourself time to daydream at work, if possible. Experiment with new ideas and ask questions. One newspaper

editor encourages his staff to indulge their creative side through humor, listening to music and brainstorming sessions because it leads to better work, an assertion seconded by many business experts.

The Importance of "Flow"

Creativity also leads to "flow," which studies show is beneficial, says Elissa Bowes-Arbeitman, an art therapy consultant. "Flow refers to a state of being completely engaged in something to the point of being in a near meditative state, leaving you much less stressed when you are done. You can experience this feeling when you are doing creative activities like writing and gardening. You can also experience this feeling from engaging in the creative art-making process," she says.

So go out and invent a new dessert, write a song, or dance a dance! It just might mean the difference between stressing out to the max (and getting sick in the process) or living out your days both happier and healthier! ✧

Margie Freeman, LCSW, CEAP

Counseling Care Specialties
2115 Millburn Avenue, Suite 100-1
Maplewood, NJ 07040-3724

Phone: 973-761-4420

Fax: 973-761-4424

Margie Freeman is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in health-and-wellness and couples/relationship issues. She has been in the counseling field for 25 years, working with individuals, couples and families, helping them learn the skills and gain the insights to achieve wholeness, self-understanding and more harmonious relationships.