

If Only We'd Had a Plan.....!

Obviously, when an electrical fire breaks out in the middle of the night in your living room downstairs, it is not the time to mount the fire extinguishers and smoke detectors that you had carefully stashed in the closet with good intentions to put up in strategic places. Similarly, when you are eight months pregnant and home alone with your two year old and you go into hard labor – this would not be the ideal time to start finding people to provide childcare while you are frantically trying to figure out how to get yourself to the hospital (or quickly boil water and call a neighbor!). While neither of these events are intended to be compared to the lifelong tragedy and pain of persistent mental illness, they are intended to illustrate the importance of planning ahead for situations that would not have a good outcome otherwise.

As family members know, episodes of acute instability in a loved one who has mental illness can be a dreaded event. Sometimes these crises have a rapid onset and other times the deterioration is gradual but progressive and families can predict that a crisis is inevitable. Strong feelings that accompany these episodes often include fear, anger, and anxiety but the most prominent experience is one of overwhelming helplessness and a sense that the situation is frighteningly out of control! During these times, who would not welcome a lifebuoy embossed with clear, step-by-step instructions on what to do to improve the situation?! Who to call for help? What do I say to my loved one? What do I want from the person(s) whom I have called for help? How dangerous is the situation to my loved one or to others? What are the options for helping my loved one be safe and get stable again? If I call the police, will they hurt or arrest him/her? What is the exact type and amount of medicine the person is taking? How will my loved one feel about the choices I make right now? Will I feel guilty? ??

If a plan has not been developed in advance, actions taken and decisions made during a time of turmoil sometimes can result in a situation that you or your loved one would not have anticipated or wanted. Although every emergency situation is different and no one can control all the variables, having a well thought out and written plan can help change an out-of-control crisis into an emergency that can be safely and compassionately managed. The calmer that the family is, the safer the person with mental illness can feel. With preparation and a plan, the family can know that when the time comes to institute the plan, their actions will be purposeful and productive and the decisions made had already been discussed and approved of by their loved one.

What, then, are the key parts in a Crisis Preparedness Plan? Preparing for an emergency or a crisis is an individualized process and different for every family. There are, however, some elements that are common to most of these situations that have been described as quite helpful to family members who have used them. The following outline offers suggestions as to what might be included in developing such a plan. Before developing this plan, you may want to talk with other families who have had crisis experiences. Find out what was helpful and harmful to them in those situations. They may share issues that you might not have thought of otherwise.

✓ **Involvement!**

Involve your mentally ill loved one in the planning process when they are feeling well.

✓ **Write it down!**

Write down the plan and distribute it to the people who may be involved in resolving the crisis.

✓ **How bad should it get ?!**

Try to come to a consensus as to what behaviors and display of symptoms would necessitate implementing the plan. That is, at some point the “caretakers” will need to assume responsibility and make the decisions about what happens next.

✓ **Name Supporters**

Identify people who can be supporters. These may include neighbors, good friends who live close by, friends or acquaintances of your loved one, AMI friends, behavioral health care providers, or others. Have their name and phone numbers clearly listed. Include what role they would play. That is, someone may be chosen in advance by your loved one who usually has a calming influence; someone else may be named to take care of children, bills, pets, whatever household upkeep is needed should an acute stay away from home become necessary; someone else may be appointed as your personal supporter, that is, someone devoted to keeping you focused, reassuring you about the plan, and perhaps removing you from the heat of the immediate upset (while a less emotionally-involved person handles it). The behavioral health care providers and/or after hours emergency services may be involved to help facilitate an emergency evaluation and intervention or placement, as necessary.

✓ **Medications**

Maintain a current list including the following:

Allergies

Type, Amount, Pharmacy, Prescribing physician, Date began
each medicine, Symptoms the medicine is treating

Indicate medicines that have **not** worked well and give reasons

✓ **What Works!?**

List the following:

- Interventions or treatments that have helped in the past
- When they should be used
- Treatments that should be avoided and why
- Preferences for treatment facilities (names, phone numbers, locations) should a higher level of care become necessary
- Generally, have the loved one write down what will help him/her feel calmer and what might reduce the symptoms at that time. Include who they would like to do these things
- Identify what actions or people are likely to make the situation worse

✓ **Safety**

One of the most sensitive but key elements of a plan is what to do if the loved one presents a danger to themselves or others. Learning in advance how to optimize support from the behavioral health care providers, law enforcement, and other planned supporters is a critical success factor.

Preparing for how to manage a crisis situation with a family member who has mental illness is a process, not an event. Start now. Ask for help. Give yourself lots of credit for doing the best you know how to do at any given moment in time, crisis or otherwise. Don't expect it to be perfect!

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