

You should know that your willingness to seek help and support for your loved one who may have a mental health issue is the most important—but often the hardest—step in getting help. Mental illness is nobody’s fault. Just like our heart or lungs can get sick, so can our brain. Mental illness can cause individuals to act in unusual ways. Persons living with mental illness do not have control over the emotional and/or physical symptoms of the illness. This is not their fault. While it may cause embarrassment at first, individuals and families need to understand that these behaviors are the result of a very real illness.

Fortunately, recovery is possible for people who live with mental illness. This short guide provides you with ideas to consider as you try to find the best quality of help for your loved one.

Facts about Mental Illness

- Mental illness is not caused by weakness of character, poor upbringing or lack of faith.
- Mental illness is nobody’s fault. Just like our heart or lungs can get sick; so can our brain.
- Mental illness is treatable.

Be attentive to the signs and symptoms.

Your observations are very important. Recognizing when something has “changed” or “is not right” with an individual’s behavior and addressing it as soon as possible is the most important step toward recovery. It is important to pay attention to physical (somatic) complaints that an individual is experiencing because many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) tend to manifest their emotional distress physically, including:

- stomach aches
- weakness
- backaches
- choking sensation in the throat
- fatigue
- tightness in the chest

Keep a record of these observations and have them available when you visit your health care provider (e.g. a primary care physician, psychiatrist or a therapist) with your loved one.

Get educated about the facts.

Learning about the details of your loved one’s disorder is another crucial step in getting help. There is scientific based information on symptoms, treatment options, recovery and other topics that is available for you to learn more about mental illness. Make sure your information comes from credible sources such as:

- NAMI (www.nami.org/aapi)
- National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)
- National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (www.naapimha.org)

You can also find information from schools, libraries, county and local health clinics and NAMI Affiliates. While there is a lot of information about mental health in general, you may have a harder time finding information specific on AAPI mental health, particularly if you are looking for information in other languages. Do not get discouraged. If you cannot find information online, contact your local AAPI community centers and clinics.

Talk to your loved one about your concerns.

The best way to help a loved one in distress is to have an honest conversation with him/her about what you have observed. When engaging in a conversation, keep in mind that the individual may not realize he/she has a problem or may not admit to his/her distress right away. Be respectful, patient and understanding when discussing the topic. Also, be aware of the cultural nuances that affect the relationship (such as family structure) and think in advance about how to acknowledge them. For example, an older AAPI individual who has a place of honor in the family may not be willing to mention or admit that he/she is experiencing a mental health problem. This person may feel too embarrassed about it, fear that this shows weakness and/or that he/she may become a burden to the family.

Share your concern with someone who can help.

Sharing with a trusted friend, faith-based leader, a teacher, your primary care physician or other family members can be instrumental in getting the help and support you need. They may be able to help you find the appropriate resources and can be a source of emotional support to you and your family. NAMI's Family-to-Family education program (www.nami.org/f2f) is a great place to find support.

Seek professional help.

Many AAPIs resist seeking professional help because of the fear that mental illness will bring shame; high levels of stigma associated with mental illness and a desire to keep issues within the family discourage many from seeking treatment. Unfortunately, while resistance and avoidance may prevent some uncomfortable moments at first, in the end, it only worsens the situation and results in a more debilitating and devastating illness. If your loved one shows signs of mental illness, seek professional help as soon as possible.

The decision to seek mental health treatment from professionals (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists) will help your loved one get diagnosed and most importantly, treated. The information you share in any health care setting is confidential by law. This means it will not be shared with anyone without your permission. Your loved one has the right of confidentiality so he/she will have to authorize the providers to share information about their treatment with you.

Learn about treatment options.

There are numerous treatment options available, including:

- talk therapies (where you talk with a health care provider, e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy)
- mind-body therapies (e.g., acupuncture, meditation, yoga)
- pharmacological options (medications to manage symptoms)
- psychosocial interventions (e.g., supportive employment)
- peer services (e.g., support groups and psycho-education)

A note on medications:

Research indicates that AAPIs tend to be slow metabolizers of some mental health related medications (e.g. psychotropic medications). For this reason, AAPIs may need smaller doses than the regular population in order to avoid side effects. Make sure your provider is aware of this and that this is taken under consideration.

Choosing the best decision for your loved one's treatment is a process often shared with your provider, with your loved one playing the most central role in the process. Make sure you and your loved one shares with your health provider your cultural beliefs and values so that they can be incorporated into your loved one's treatment plan.

Know your loved one's rights.

When seeking mental health services, people with mental illness and their families are guaranteed rights to help them access resources and navigate the system effectively. For example, free language access services, such as interpretation, translation and access to materials in other languages, should be available to those whose primary language is not English. By federal law, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, organizations receiving federal funding are required to make interpretation and translation services available to anyone that may need them. If they do not offer them voluntarily, make sure to ask for these services. For more information about language access, go to the Office of Civil Rights (www.hhs.gov/ocr/) or check with your local state health department to see what rights you have as a patient/client.

Connect with community resources.

Despite the lack of specific AAPI mental health-focused services, there are numerous networks of organizations and providers within the community that offer a variety of supports to individuals and families with mental health issues, such as support groups and talk therapy education classes. Organizations such as Legal Aid Clinics, homeless shelters and NAMI Affiliates often provide valuable services, including support groups, resource referral and advocacy services free of charge. These resources can provide additional emotional anchors, as they are most often provided by people who have personal experience with mental illness.

Be an advocate to ensure that your loved one's rights are respected and protected.

Because the process of seeking support and help is often complex, stressful and overwhelming, it is important to be proactive during this process. Often, individuals and families are not aware of advocacy resources to help guarantee that their concerns are being addressed throughout the treatment process. Make sure to educate yourself about local resources and make sure to ask questions and seek answers.

Focus on your loved one's strengths and successes.

Focusing on the strengths rather than the troubles of someone living with a mental health disorder is a critical aspect of recovery. Instead of always paying attention to your loved one's illness, focus on other aspects of his/her life. Encourage and constantly praise small successes. Supporting the individual and building on his/her strengths and capacities can enhance his/her coping skills as well as his/her self esteem. This also serves to remind you about how brave and accomplished your loved one is!

While the road to recovery can be filled with pain and frustration, recovery is possible. The road to recovery can be less difficult when you are aware of the things you can do to make it easier. With your support, your loved one can recover.