

Elements of Good Communication

Ideal communication, especially when mental illness is involved, should consist of a number of elements:

- Clear communication. This will increase our chance that the message we intend to send is the one that is received.
- Willingness to listen to concerns and worries of family members.
- Use of language that is understandable to all persons involved.

When a family member has a mental illness, effective communication is even more im-

portant than usual. Your family member can experience stress when they have difficulty understanding what is said or what is expected of them. It can also be stressful when there are many arguments or too much criticism in the household. Stress is a common trigger for relapse, so it is important to reduce stress whenever

Communication Guidelines

- Use short, clear direct sentences. Long, involved explanations may be difficult to follow as some mental disorders make concentrating difficult. Short, clear, and specific statements are easier to understand and answer.
- Keep the content of communication simple and focused. Cover only one topic; give only one direction at a time. Otherwise, it can be very confusing to follow the conversation, especially for someone with a mental illness.
- Do what you can to keep the ‘stimulation level’ as low as possible. A loud voice, an insistent manner, making accusations and criticisms can be very stressful for anyone who has suffered a mental breakdown.
- If your family member appears withdrawn and uncommunicative, back off for a while. Your communication will have a better chance of getting the desired response when your family member is more open to talking.
- You may find that your family member has difficulty remembering what you have said. You may have to repeat instructions and directions.
- Be pleasant and firm. If you make your position clear and do not undermine what you are expressing, your family member will not as readily misinterpret it.
- If the discussion turns into an argument, everyone involved in the discussion should agree to call a ‘time-out.’ It can be helpful to take a few deep breaths or take a short walk, then go back to the discussion.

- Listen carefully to what your family member tells you. Acknowledge that you appreciate their point of view and understand their feelings.