

The Family Guidelines

The family guidelines are a set of tenets to assist veterans, families and providers in aiding the recovery process for those with serious and persistent mental illnesses. They are designed with the biology of mental illness in mind. They should be used as a guide to slow down sensory input for a person who may be coping with a psychotic illness. They can be used to help establish basic ground rules for living with and recovering from a mental illness.

- 1) **GO SLOW.** Recovery takes time. Rest is important. Things will get better in their own time.
- 2) **KEEP IT COOL.** Enthusiasm is normal, but keep it toned down. Disagreement is normal, but keep this toned down too. Limit interactions that over-stimulate a person with serious mental illness.
- 3) **KEEP IT WARM.** Family bonds are meaningful and important. We recommend modulating the highs and lows when communicating to create a family attitude of “benign indifference” that is caring, supportive and loving.
- 4) **GIVE EACH OTHER SPACE.** Time out is important for everyone. It’s okay to reach out. It's okay to say “no.” Allow veterans to withdraw when they need to, and learn to recognize the behaviors that signal this need.
- 5) **SET LIMITS.** Everyone needs to know what the rules are. A few good rules keep things clear. Another way to reduce over-stimulating the veteran and overextending the family’s coping resources is to develop agreed upon rules for living together and reinforcing them through setting limits. Structure makes “keeping it cool and warm” possible.
- 6) **IGNORE WHAT YOU CAN’T CHANGE.** Let some things slide but don’t ignore threatening, violent, or psychotic behavior. Agreeing on an action plan ahead of time will help avoid a major crisis if it can’t be ignored.
- 7) **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Say what you have to say clearly, calmly, and positively.
- 8) **FOLLOW THE TREATMENT PLAN.** This is an action plan for treating the illness. If medication, family psychoeducation, and/or other interventions are part of the treatment plan, then follow this plan to aid recovery. Make changes as needed in conjunction with the triad involved in your loved ones' care - veteran, family and treatment provider.
- 9) **CARRY ON BUSINESS AS USUAL.** Re-establish family routines as quickly as possible. In any long-term illness (like diabetes, heart disease, or schizophrenia), veterans and families must make adjustments in their living style, be on the lookout for any problems, and keep on living their lives.
- 10) **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** Families need to take care of themselves, too. It’s difficult to care for someone else if you are not taking good care of yourself. It is important to "recharge" one’s own battery.

- 11) **AVOID STREET DRUGS & ALCOHOL.** They make symptoms worse, can cause relapse, and prevent recovery. They have a negative effect on the brain and can interfere with prescribed medications. If your relative uses alcohol or street drugs, encourage open dialogue about it with them and the treatment team in order to best optimize their recovery. Avoid caffeine too, as it can interfere with sleep.
- 12) **PICK UP ON EARLY WARNING SIGNS.** Note changes and develop a list of early warning signs that may indicate your relative is relapsing. Warning signs are different for each veteran so it is important to be aware of which symptoms indicate relapse for your family member. Discuss this with your family member and their treatment provider in order to head off a relapse.
- 13) **SOLVE PROBLEMS STEP-BY-STEP.** Follow a sequential process to resolving concerns.
- 14) **LOWER EXPECTATIONS TEMPORARILY.** After an acute psychotic episode, veterans need an extended period of recovery in which they cannot function as well as they did before the acute episode. Use a personal yardstick to compare this month to last month instead of last year.

Guidelines adapted from:

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