

Mental illness from a sibling's perspective

Written by Anna Meyer and Matthea Little Smith
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Even though I have always known that something was a “little off” with my sister, learning that she had a mental illness was devastating. This is something I hear many times from folks in the community about their loved ones. As Black people, we don't mind saying our family member is “a little off” or “a little crazy,” but when our loved one gets an actual diagnosis, it becomes real. There are many questions we ask ourselves: Will I get sick, too? Can I pass this on to my children? What will my friends think of me? Will the church think that I am not a Christian?

Often people who live with mental illnesses do not come face to face with their situation; rather, they may think, “I just feel sad. This will pass.” On average, a person with a mental illness waits 10 years before seeking professional help. People often fear that going to the psychiatrist and finding out that they have a mental illness will change everything—they often feel to blame for their disorder and wish it were just a passing nightmare.

My sister decided to look for help on her own, and when she was diagnosed, she felt so sad and isolated—as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped over her head. I could see the pain she felt, perhaps more than the rest of the family because we are very close.

My sister's diagnosis caused me an incredible amount of pain. I felt the need to block my feelings and avoided seeing her. I didn't know what to say or how to help her. I searched for information on the Internet, trying to learn the symptoms and causes of her illness. I also hoped to find something that could help me get through this process. I have since learned that running away from the situation or trying to feel indifferent won't make me feel better.

When you first learn of a sibling's illness, it may seem impossible to feel better again. But siblings of people with mental illnesses over time can gain knowledge and skills that help them endure their brother or sisters' illnesses and that help them maintain a relationship with them. If you have a sibling with a mental illness, it may help you to keep a few points in mind to help you learn to live more at peace with your loved one:

- You cannot cure your sibling's mental illness.
- Mental illnesses affect the individual with the mental illness and his or her family members.
- No matter what you do, the symptoms of your brother or sister's mental illness could get better or worse.
- Remember that this is an illness. Try to think of your sibling separately from his or her illness.
- Your sibling's mental illness is not a reason to be embarrassed. Most likely, you will find that people fear mental illnesses because they lack knowledge about them.
- You are not a social worker. Your role is to be a brother or sister.
- Recognize the incredible bravery your brother or sister has shown in living with his or her mental illness.
- After denial, sadness and rage, acceptance comes. If you add learning to this mix, you may come more quickly to a place of understanding.
- It is natural to feel many emotions when you have a sibling with a mental illness, such as pain, guilt, fear, rage, sadness, confusion and so on. You, not your sibling, are responsible for your feelings.
- With time, you could come to see the positive side of your experience: you will have become

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more conscientious, sensitive, receptive, understanding and mature.

We Want to Hear From You!

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Minnesota offers free classes that help family members learn to cope with and better help a loved one with a mental illness.

For more information or sign up for a free NAMI class, contact Matthea at msmith1@nami.org or (651) 645-2948 ext. 108. You may also visit www.namihelps.org for more free resources.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) authored the information provided in this article.