

JACKSON COUNSELLING and FAMILY THERAPY

Family, Couples, Individual & Adolescent Counsellor

Helpful Articles by Jenny Jackson



Becoming a Carer for a Mentally Ill Family Member

Becoming the caregiver of a mentally ill family member can turn your world upside-down.

Maybe life has been going along steadily and then their behaviour gets odder and odder. You may look at others in the family, silently exchanging looks, asking each other what's going on and not having any answers. Then perhaps a psychotic episode occurs when the behaviour has become really out of character and you need an ambulance, perhaps the police, if you are unable to get your loved one to hospital yourselves. Everyone else at home may be shaken, scared and worried.

Then begins the journey through the mental health system. First comes the assessment process with lots of questions when the family's observations and assistance are really important. Then there's the introduction of medications to see what works best and at what dose. This can take months. If your loved one has been admitted to an inpatient unit there will be visits home and the transition back to work perhaps. When the inpatient staff assess that your family member is ready to return home they are referred to the community mental health service.

But what does recovery mean? No one is able to predict this or say exactly what it means or how long it may take. Perhaps it's something like getting back to some of the things your family member did before becoming ill or it may mean developing a different life plan.

By now you may be grieving the loss of the person your loved one used to be and the change of relationship from partner, sibling or child to more of a caregiver. You may have lost friends who have been scared off by your grief, or the loss of their friend as they used to know them. You may also be surprised at the friends who have stuck by you and continue to support you. You may be trying to survive on reduced income. You may be tired or on edge from watching for changes of behaviour or compliance with medication – warning signs of deterioration. You may need a respite care plan from the community team.

It's possible to involve a non-government agency like Equip in Auckland (09 477 0338) to help support your family member and the rest of the family too. SF – Supporting Families affected by Mental Illness www.sfnat.org.nz is another agency that offers family support via support workers and groups.

No one can tell you what to expect when this sort of grief hits. At times the force of it may feel as though it will take you under and drown you like an enormous wave - anger, despair, lack of energy or motivation, hopelessness. This is when it's vital to take care of yourself. Hang on to whatever keeps you anchored and

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sane whether it's friends, family, whatever makes you laugh or think about something else even briefly – movies, comedy TV, exercise, dancing, singing, gardening, meditation, church, art, craft, working at something you're good at. Can you get away for a weekend? Go out for an evening?

One of the important things to know about grief is that like the tide it does recede. It will ease but it may take longer than we or our friends and family expect. If people are tired of hearing about your situation, if you feel unable to talk about what's going on or you feel as though your grief is spilling over onto your children too much it is a good idea to find a counselor or support group where you can unload. Just knowing that someone is going to listen to you for an hour a week or a fortnight and where you can be yourself can be really helpful.

Helpful books/links:

Rain Hail or Shine by Tricia Irving, available from www.skylight.org.nz and libraries.

http://auckland.webhealth.co.nz/page/auckland_45.php?article=70&category=Mental+Health

<http://www.mind.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/433593B9-2688-4A0C-B032-84DEF3F9AB94/0/Howtcopeasacarer2006.pdf>

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