



Standing on Solid Ground: Finding Your Path Along the Challenging Road of Caregiving and Mental Illness Handout

Caring for someone with mental illness can cause you to feel as if you are standing on shaky ground. These tips below can help you regain your footing.

Seek Knowledge

- Learn about symptoms, triggers, patterns, or course of the illness. Learn about treatment. This is a powerful tool you can invest in to help you find solid ground.
- Learning about the illness can help you distinguish the person from their illness.
- Learn how the illness usually effects your loved one. You may be better prepared and less reactive during a crisis.
- Get some facts. Figure out what your loved one can independently manage. Practice when and how to support your love one's safety. Knowledge can help you to decide your approach to caregiving.

What are the symptoms, triggers, and patterns you notice with your loved one's illness?

Where might you turn to gain more knowledge? (Examples: National Alliance on Mental Illness-NAMI, Alzheimer's Association, VA National Center for PTSD, Defense and Veteran's Brain Injury Center, VA Health Providers, AA, Al-Anon, NA, Nar-Anon, internet, local library)

Attend to Your Emotions

- Pay attention to your emotions as they can impact your thoughts, reactions, health and wellbeing.
- Your emotions are a great source of information. They can alert you to your stress level or guide your decisions.
- Your emotions can alert you when you need to set a limit. They can guide caring for yourself and your needs.
- Your emotions can give you direction. They can help you be less reactive and more purposeful in your response.

What emotions have you been ignoring and how can you take care of them?



Identify Responsibility

- It takes practice to sort out what are your responsibilities and what belongs to your loved one. This is often true when their illness effects their abilities. How do you sort out what they are capable of and what you can expect of them? It takes clear knowledge of the illness to figure out what is fair to expect of them. Support their decisions and encourage them to take charge of what they can. Being a support may require that you learn to let go and accept what you have no control over.

How do you know what are your responsibilities and what are your loved ones?

Share Your Experience

- Communicate your thoughts and feelings. It may not change the illness, but it does have the potential to change you. When you share; your thoughts, feelings, needs, and your requests, you reinforce that you matter. You are also creating a bridge between yourself and others.

What have you been keeping silent about that you need to share?

Find Support

- Connecting with others will influence how well you manage and how solid you feel yourself. Think of a time that you shared openly with another. Did you feel less alone afterwards? Did you find some relief and support from sharing? Share your concerns. Set clear limits about what you need or what you won't tolerate. Request help and seek connection from others.

Who can you turn to for connection?

Who might you add to your list of connections? VA Caregiver Support Line, The Care Support Coordinator, VA staff, National Alliance Mental Illness (NAMI support groups), a counselor, Alzheimer's Assoc., VA PTSD Line, Veterans Crisis Line, Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon. The list is as endless as your imagination!