

SURVIVAL GUIDE

A Practical Plan for Supporting a Loved One with a Mental Illness

Great progress has been made in the diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill in recent decades. There have been major breakthroughs in medications and types of treatments. Resources never before available are now a real prospect in the management of your loved one's case.

When you have a serious legal problem, you engage an attorney to guide you through the legal system. When you have a loved one with a mental illness an advocate is needed to guide the case through the mental health system. That someone must be familiar with the basics of mental illness and the resources in the field to assist in pursuing your loved one's recovery.

Almost certainly that someone must be you. Mental health facilities and programs have been overloaded and underfunded for decades. You are the one that really cares and are the one who has been and will be in close contact with the case. But you must gain a familiarity with the basics of mental illness and the system. Listed below are some practical suggestions to help you get started.

- 1. JOIN A STRONG SUPPORT GROUP.** You can't do it alone. You will need the education, information and support of an organization. NAMI Contra Costa is one such group. Visit www.namicontracosta.org or email info@namicontracosta.org.
- 2. START AND KEEP A JOURNAL.** Get a 3- ring binder, fill it with lined paper, divide it into several parts and make entries as you have the time and the need. Setup one section to record observations about your subject, one on notes about ideas and concepts you think important, one on listings of various locations, facilities, programs and other resources that might be helpful in your efforts.
- 3. SETUP FILES.** Setup a permanent set of files to receive all the paperwork the case will generate. Ask for a copy of any document you come in contact with. Especially copies of diagnosis's and prescriptions. Follow the rule that you never let an original out of the file, but make many copies and make certain that all the folks involved in the case have a copy.
- 4. ONE PAGE SUMMARY.** Do not go from office to office endlessly repeating the basics of the case. Create a summary, as you would a resume for a job search, that gives the particulars of the case up to the present time. Put the subjects name, address, phone number, e mail address, and contact person (you). At the top of the sheet. Use a type size that will get a lot of information on one page, but large enough to be legible (Font 10). Leave the document in the computer memory for future use. The page should be limited to just one page as that encourages the reader to actually read the material.
- 5. COVER LETTER.** A very brief cover letter (Optional) may add to the flexibility of your message. Leave that in the computer's memory.
- 6. RELEASE OF CONFIDENTIALITY.** Get your loved one to sign a Release of Confidentiality at each office or facility that your loved one goes to. This is imperative. You can't talk with the doctor or his staff without that signed document. You can download this form at www.namicontracosta.org.
- 7. EDUCATION AND INFORMATION.** In a very short period of time you can educate yourself on the basics of mental illness. NAMI-CC offers a FREE 12 week, one night weekly, course that gives you the information you need.
- 8. SUPPORT GROUPS.** These groups will give you the continuing support and information you will need. They are held monthly throughout the county. For information, email info@namicontracosta.org or go to www.namicontracosta.org for dates and times of groups in the county.