

## **16 POINTERS TO HELP A SPOUSE LIVE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS**

**Kathy Bayes & Ft. Wayne, Ind., Spouse Support Group\***

1. The mental illness your spouse suffers is something that is happening to your entire family. All are affected, it is nobody's fault. It is not your spouse's fault, it is not your fault, it is not your children's fault. **IT IS NOBODY'S FAULT.** It is a misfortunate illness. It is **NOT** automatic grounds for divorce, any more than other disabilities.
2. **YOU CANNOT FIX YOUR SPOUSE.** There is **NOTHING** you can do to make him well, so don't feel compelled to try. You don't have the answers. All you can do is be supportive and loving (in a profound sense), and handle the everyday details and practical issues of life for him that he cannot cope with.
3. All members of the family have a responsibility to cope with the illness. Escape is not a helpful way of dealing with the crisis. You all need each other.
4. The ill spouse must recognize and accept the illness, be willing to receive treatment, and if possible, learn to manage the illness. He must cooperate with his medical team. He must take his medications. He must learn to recognize relapse symptoms. If the ill spouse is not willing to do these things, it may become impossible for the family to continue to support him. The family is not required to throw away their own lives for someone who refuses to cooperate. There are limits, and they must be enforced without feelings of guilt.
5. Educate yourself concerning every aspect of the illness. **EDUCATION BRINGS COMPASSION.** Ignorance encourages anger and fear.
6. Grieve your loss. It is a great loss. The grief process for this illness is similar to the grief process for the death of a spouse, except it doesn't end. You need to allow yourself to experience the entire process of grieving.
7. Get help for yourself to cope with this incredible challenge, either from your own counseling sessions, or a NAMI support group. You can't do it alone. With help, you can live life with gusto. Don't refuse to recognize your own need for help, just because the ill spouse is getting most of the attention. This illness is happening to your whole family. You should not try to do it alone.
8. Help your children **UNDERSTAND** the illness as much as their ages allow. **NO FAMILY SECRETS!** Don't deny them the opportunity of learning about the illness, the unfair stigma attached to it, and developing their skills in coping. It can be an incredible learning opportunity for them. If they need professional help to understand it and their own feelings, get it for them.
9. Try to create a safe environment for the spouse to express himself without feeling threatened, constrained or condemned. He desperately needs a nurturing, safe place to express the incredible frustration he is feeling about this illness.
10. You and your children need to **SHARE YOUR FEELINGS** honestly and openly. They are suffering a loss also. It's OK to feel angry and cheated. At times, you may feel embarrassed by the ill spouse's behavior. Avoid trying to protect your spouse by not discussing the problem with family members or

friends. Don't require your children to conspire with you in a code of "Family Secrecy". Family secrets will isolate you from others. Humor and openness will help the entire family, including your spouse, accept the illness for exactly what it is and reduce guilt for all family members. Remember that small children, by their very nature, assume that they are responsible for anything in their environment that goes wrong.

11. Never put yourself or your children in physical danger. If you sense your spouse is becoming dangerous, you should leave and call professional help. You should never tolerate abuse of you or your children! SAY NO WAY, and mean it. Trust your instincts & intuition on this one.
12. Become your spouse's advocate with the medical professionals, and be assertively involved in his treatment and medication. Don't be afraid to go with him to appointments, to call his psychiatrist if you suspect something isn't right, or to inform the psychiatrist of the effects of the medication being prescribed. If the psychiatrist won't cooperate with you, demand a different one! Stand your ground assertively, but try not to be a pain in the neck. Treatment should involve the entire family, so find professionals who will work with the whole family. You know more about your spouse's illness than anyone else. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.
13. Coldly assess what your spouse can and cannot handle, and then compensate assertively. Most people with severe mental illness cannot handle money, some household chores, time commitments, relatives, too much stress. It is not uncommon for them to want to move all the time, searching for peace. YOU MUST NOT DO THINGS FOR YOUR SPOUSE THAT HE CAN DO FOR HIMSELF. Don't rob him of his dignity, but recognize the imperative need to create some stability for your family, financially and otherwise. You will probably need to get a job and develop a career, if you are not now working.
14. Maintain your own identity. Resist becoming consumed with this illness. Life goes on and you have an obligation to yourself and your children to take care of yourself and to meet your own needs. We all must continue to develop our interests and talents. You are a valuable human being, so don't play the martyr role and sacrifice yourself. That's just self pity. "GET A LIFE."
15. Always hope for healing. The medicines do work, and new ones are constantly being developed. You may get your spouse back whole some day. If nothing else, the experience will broaden and deepen you in ways you never imagined. You CAN be a better person for it. Or you can choose to let it destroy you and your family. It IS your choice.
16. Keep in mind that bad things happen to almost everyone, and you're no exception. You have not been singled out for special persecution. Trying to make good choices in life won't protect you from misfortune. You haven't been dumb to "get yourself in this situation." IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. Life is not easy. We have to take what we get and make the best of it. "Bloom where you are planted."