

# YOU CAN BE AN ADVOCATE

## *Helping an Adult Family Member with a Mental Illness and/or Substance Use Disorder*

### **What is an Advocate?**

“Advocate” is defined in the dictionary as “a person who pleads for or in behalf of another; intercessor.” Anyone can advocate for another person, and families often play a key role in helping a person with a mental illness or a substance abuse disorder to find treatment and other resources. Families may also wish to provide continuing support as their loved one progresses along the path of recovery. “Family” is broadly defined to include any supportive relative or friend who wishes to support an individual with a mental illness and/or substance use disorder. There are many ways to be an advocate:

### **On a Family Level**

- Recognize that your family member who is affected by a mental illness and/or substance use disorder (“family member”) is an adult with the right to make his/her own choices regarding treatment and medication.
- Help your family member gain access to services and treatment and provide support in expressing his/her preferences and goals to providers. Accompany your family member to appointments if possible.
- Ask your family member to sign a release form that gives his/her provider permission to share specific information with you about his/her diagnosis, treatment, and appointments.
- You don’t need a release to provide information about your affected family member with his/her provider. You are the expert: you possess information that nobody else can provide about your family member’s history and what is going on at home.
- Educate yourself about the diagnosis of your family member. You can visit [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org) or [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) for diagnosis-specific fact sheets.
- If a clinician or other professional is not respectful of your family member’s wishes and preferences with respect to treatment, goals, or family involvement, encourage him/her to seek treatment elsewhere.
- Encourage your family member to keep appointments and to take medications as prescribed. If your family member is not willing to do so, find out why, and provide support in resolving the problem.
- Develop a crisis plan: Encourage your family member to make a written plan for how to handle a psychiatric crisis; including when and where you will seek outside help.
- Express hope to your family member and to others about the future. Mental illness and/or substance use may change a person’s life path, and there will likely be some grief issues for both the person with the illness and for family. However, people with mental illness and substance abuse disorders can and do go on to have successful and meaningful lives that include career and family.
- Don’t require children or siblings to “keep the secret” about a mental illness and/or substance use disorder in the family. Doing so will create an atmosphere of shame and isolate the family even further. Answer their questions openly and honestly, and in a manner that respects the privacy of the affected family member.
- Take care of yourself: Follow a healthy diet, get plenty of sleep and exercise, and don’t neglect your own hobbies and interests. Join a support group or seek counseling if necessary. Ask your family member’s provider(s) about family support opportunities. Or visit NAMI-CT’s website ([www.namict.org](http://www.namict.org)) for information about support groups, Family-to-Family trainings, and other programs that help family members support the recovery of their loved ones.

### **On a Community Level:**

- Ask your faith community, local PTA, or civic organization to sponsor a presentation about mental illness, recovery, and community supports for individuals with psychiatric disabilities.
- Respond to stigmatizing comments about mental illness and substance abuse disorders or to unfair and inaccurate generalizations about people with these disorders with factual information.
- Respond to inaccurate portrayals of mental illness in the news, on television or in the movies by writing a letter to the editor or writing to the network. When you see positive portrayals of people with mental illnesses who are successful in their communities, write thank you letters and ask for more such stories.
- Garner support and publicity for special events or important issues related to mental illness in your community by contacting a reporter from a local TV station or newspaper or by writing a letter to the editor.

### **On a Policy Level:**

- Wear a T-shirt with a mental health slogan to hearings and community events.
- **Vote!** Be informed on candidates' positions on issues affecting those with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. Help your family member and others to do so by encouraging them to register to vote and providing them with a ride to the polls.
- Sign up to receive updates on legislative activity that affects those with mental health and/or substance use disorders by contacting \_\_\_\_\_.
- Testify at local planning, zoning and budget hearings and attend neighborhood and public meetings. Speak up in favor of non-profits that provide essential community-based mental health services. Tell how these programs have helped a family member.
- Meet with your state and federal legislators. Tell your personal stories and show how the right services helped your family member achieve independence in the community. This “puts a face” on mental illness, educates legislators and fights stigma. Ask for something specific, and take fact sheets with you.
- Contact NAMI-CT to find out more about public policy advocacy.
- Join your local Regional Mental Health Board through the Catchment Area Council for your town. Regional Boards provide you with an opportunity to improve Connecticut's mental health system. You can submit your own feedback on services, and interview staff and clients from state funded mental health programs in Eastern Connecticut. Yearly evaluations of state-funded mental health programs are submitted to the Office of the Commissioner and in the past, have led to significant change in how services are provided. For contact information for the Regional Board representing your town, visit <http://www.ct.gov/dmhas/cwp/view.asp?a=2908&q=334692>.

Advocacy comes in many forms, and which form is appropriate for you will depend on where you are on your journey with your family member. Some or all of these ideas may help you to support your family member. You may have just discovered that your loved one has a diagnosis; so for you, advocacy may be a matter of ensuring that his/her immediate needs are met. Or perhaps your family member is doing well now, and you are ready to advocate on a community, state, or even a national level, to change perceptions about mental illness and substance abuse disorders and to improve services for everyone. You decide!

Contact \_\_\_\_\_ for more information.