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When A Loved One Is Hospitalized With A Depressive Illness

Source: Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)

Those who are seriously ill with depression are at high risk for suicide. Hospitalization alone does not prevent that possibility. It takes time for medication and/or therapy to take effect and for recovery to begin. The involvement and advocacy of family and friends is an important and appropriate part of the treatment plan. The following suggestions will provide a guideline for working with the treatment facility when a loved one is undergoing treatment for depression.

At Admission

What is the policy on involving family members with the patient's care and availability of staff to answer questions? Printed sheets that promise classes, sessions, etc. without a definite date or appointment specified to meet with a supervisor, nurse, or doctor are of little or no use. Set up an appointment and obtain a name and phone number of someone who will be available to answer your questions throughout the duration of treatment. After a patient is safely admitted, don't leave the area until you are satisfied that all of your questions and concerns are answered, and you have established a contact person who will be able to answer any additional questions that may come up. Ask the doctor or your contact what the treatment plan is, what has to change in the patient's attitude, behaviour and physical characteristics before he or she is discharged, and any additional questions you have regarding the patient's care and treatment plan.

During Treatment

What, if any, is your role and how can you assist the patient in this process? If you have any questions or disagree with any decision at any time, it is very important that you discuss them with your doctor. You will know the patient better than the doctor/staff and may be able to shed light on important issues. Patients may not recognize behaviour changes because they are ill; the doctor/staff may not recognize differences, especially if they are not familiar with the patient. *You are the best person to observe and state anything you are concerned about.* Don't be afraid to ask specific questions about how the patient's treatment is progressing, e.g. is the patient participating in group or individual therapy, or both; is he or she with students, interns, registered nurses, practical nurses, doctors, etc. Find out the actual amount of time the doctor is spending with the patient. This may determine the quality and value of care the patient is receiving.

Upon Discharge

Some treatment facilities have a release or discharge meeting with the staff, patient, and significant others. Some do not. You can insist on a discharge meeting to determine if the patient is ready to leave and if he or she is healthy enough to manage his or her own care or is able to obtain care from some other source. There should always be a continuing treatment plan. In addition, if there is time lapse between the time the discharge date is decided upon and the actual discharge, ask the doctor to review any changes in the patient during that time. (Even a few hours can present situations that would preclude discharge). Ask the doctor on what the decision to discharge is based, and voice your concerns if you disagree with the decision. Check with the patient to see if written goals have been established. You can help the patient arrive at some constructive short-term goals for solving specific problems. Your interest will show the person you care. The patient should have specific goals in writing before leaving the treatment facility. Evaluate the resources available. Are there outside resources such as ministers, relatives, and friends who can help in the recovery process? Continuing observation and support are vital. Follow-up is crucial to ensure a successful recovery.

“There is hope and there is help.”