

**Rethink
Mental
Illness**

How you can help

A guide for friends, families and loved ones, written in collaboration with people who have been there.



When someone you care about is severely affected by mental illness, the impact can be overwhelming for them and for you. You might feel unsure about what to look out for, how to start a conversation, or what support is available.

You are not alone.

At Rethink Mental Illness, we help people navigate these moments every day. And while every experience is different, one thing stays the same: with the right support, things can improve.

This guide brings together the signs to look out for, practical things you can do, and where to turn for help. Think of it as a companion you can return to whenever you need it.

You are not expected to know all the answers but this guide can act as a useful resource you can refer to when you need it.

For more information on how to look after yourself visit page 14

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I felt better about myself and **less anxious about my voices**”

Andrew



“

For the first time, I felt truly listened to and understood. Being part of a welcoming group helped me realise I wasn't alone and that the voices didn't have to control my life. There was a lot of hope – something I hadn't felt for a long time”

I started hearing voices and didn't realise at first that they weren't real. Over time, they became more intense, and I also developed some unusual beliefs. I was frightened and unsure who to talk to, and I avoided seeking help because I was scared of what might happen.

A family member noticed I wasn't myself and encouraged me to try counselling. I wasn't sure how talking would help, but it helped me feel safe enough to understand what I was experiencing. After my first appointment, I was told about a hearing voices group.

I was nervous at first, but meeting others with similar experiences showed me I wasn't alone. Sharing my story lifted a huge weight from my shoulders. The group was welcoming and non-judgmental, and I learned ways to stop giving the voices power. I still hear them, but they no longer cause me anxiety, and I now live a calmer, more hopeful life.

Hearing voices and unusual beliefs

Hearing voices or having beliefs that feel frightening or fixed can be a sign that someone is experiencing psychosis. For the person going through it, these experiences feel completely real, and talking openly can make a world of difference.

How you can help

- Stay calm and be curious. Ask gentle questions about what they are experiencing without judging or challenging their reality.
- Let them know you are on their side. Feeling believed and supported can help build trust.
- Encourage them to speak to their GP or get in touch with their Community Mental Health Team if they have one.
- It might be the first time your loved one has experienced hearing voices or unusual beliefs. You or your loved one can contact their local NHS Early intervention in psychosis team (EIT). You can search for their details online.
- If sleep is an issue, you can start there. Sometimes it is an easier way in and gives professionals a chance to explore what is going on.



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Remember that your sibling or loved one is still them, always. Hold onto the good memories in times of crisis.”

Helen

What you might say

“That sounds really frightening. I’m here with you.”

“Would talking about it help right now?”

“I see it differently, but I want to understand your experience.”

If it becomes a crisis

- Try not to show panic. Your calmness can help steady the situation.
- Contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- If you are worried about immediate safety, go to A&E or call 999.

Extreme changes in mood

Feeling extremely high, low, or switching quickly between the two can be part of conditions such as bipolar disorder. These shifts can affect sleep, behaviour, money management, relationships and day-to-day routines.

How you can help

- Encourage them to speak to their GP or mental health team. Medication and psychological support can help stabilise mood.
- Avoid criticism or lectures. Even when behaviour is difficult, blaming rarely helps.
- Explore small, practical steps. Routine, sleep, eating regularly and staying hydrated can all help.

If it becomes a crisis

- If you are worried about their safety or the safety of others, contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- Professionals might not be able to share details with you, but they can listen to the information you give.
- It is fine to step back if a situation becomes unsafe. Your wellbeing matters too.

“

My diagnosis doesn't define me.”

Vhea



What you might say

“I care about you and I'm worried things feel out of control.”

“What might help you feel more settled right now?”

“Shall we talk to someone together?”

“

I'm loving, compassionate and full of purpose. Even after mania, confusion and the lowest parts of recovery, life turned itself around. I'm now training as a mental health nurse, using my experience to care for others and remind them that hope always remains.”

I want to start by sharing how I see myself: loving, compassionate and thoughtful. I enjoy singing, dancing, reading, writing and learning Spanish. I always remind myself that I am more than my bipolar disorder.

In 2020, when I was eighteen, I experienced a manic episode during quarantine and was admitted to hospital. At the time, I didn't believe I was unwell. I felt full of energy and completely disconnected from reality. What grounded me throughout my stay was my Christian faith. I held onto hope, even when the environment around me was unfamiliar and overwhelming.

Realising I was in hospital was difficult, and the months that followed were even harder. The depression that came afterwards left me feeling lost. My confidence disappeared, and I stepped away from university because I felt unable to cope.

My parents carried me through that time with constant support. My friends and church community also played a huge role in helping me rebuild my life and identity.

Now I'm in my third year of mental health nursing, completing a placement on a psychiatric ward, the same kind of setting where I was once a patient. My experience helps me care with empathy and see the person behind every diagnosis.

Life truly can turn itself around.”

Panic attacks

Panic attacks can be frightening and may feel sudden and intense. Symptoms can include shaking, chest discomfort or feeling unable to breathe. They always pass, even when they feel overwhelming.

How you can help

- Stay close, stay calm and speak gently.
- Help them slow their breathing by counting together.
- Suggest getting some fresh air or light movement if they feel like they need to escape.
- Support them to explore self-help, therapy or medication options with a GP.

If it becomes a crisis

- Contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- If symptoms last longer than 15 minutes, or you are unsure, seek urgent medical advice.

“The worst part of living with this condition is mainly that it can just come out of nowhere, even if nothing has triggered it.”

Rebecca



What you might say

“I know this is frightening, but it will pass. I’m here.”

“Shall we try breathing slowly together?”

“Is there something that usually helps you?”

Self-harm

Self-harm is often used as a way to cope with overwhelming emotions. It can be difficult to see someone you care about in distress, but your steady presence can make a real difference.

How you can help

- Stay patient. Ultimatums rarely work and can increase shame.
- Help them explore their feelings if they want to.
- Offer support in accessing medical care for wounds.
- Encourage them to consider talking to their GP or mental health team when they feel ready.

If it becomes a crisis

- Contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- Call 999 or go to A&E if there is a risk of serious harm.
- Suggest emotional support from Samaritans on 116 123.
- Contact their GP or the out-of-hours service, especially if you live with them.
- Check whether they have a crisis plan or access to a crisis service.

What you might say

“I’m here for you and I want to understand what you’re feeling.”

“You’re not a burden. You deserve support.”

“Would talking about what led up to this help?”

“

Recovery isn't easy and it doesn't happen in a straight line. I learned to look for the small glimmers of hope, even when everything felt lost. Those tiny moments helped me keep going and reminded me that hope is always there – even when you don't believe it yourself.”

I've been struggling with my mental health, and I want to share my story so someone else might believe that hope is possible, even when things feel unbearable.

I remember feeling anxious and different from my friends from a young age. When COVID-19 hit, everything felt out of control, and that fear followed me into secondary school. Anxiety made school incredibly hard, and I slowly withdrew. Later, I was diagnosed as autistic, which helped me understand why I'd been masking for years and felt so exhausted.

As my mental health worsened, I struggled to cope in school and in the community. I received intensive support and spent time in hospital, where I felt lost and frightened that things might never change.

What changed everything was realising how much my illness affected the people I love, especially my younger sister. That moment made me decide I didn't want to give up.

Recovery hasn't been easy or quick. I still attend therapy and take medication. But I've learned to notice the small things, the glimmers of hope. I now dream of working, starting a family and helping improve the mental health system. Hope gave me another chance, and I believe it's there for everyone – **including you.**



“

I've learned to notice the small things – the glimmers of hope.”

Jessie

What you might say

“Where would you feel most comfortable today?”

“Is there one small thing we could do together?”

“You're not alone. I'm here.”

Feeling withdrawn or shutting down

Feeling distant, uninterested or disconnected from daily life can be a sign of depression, anxiety or feeling overwhelmed.

How you can help

- Recognise that this is a real and draining experience.
- Suggest simple, low-pressure activities.
- Keep things manageable. Small steps, one at a time.
- Stay connected. A quick message or call can make a real difference.
- Encourage them to speak to their GP, especially if day-to-day functioning is becoming difficult.

If it becomes a crisis

- Contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- If anxiety builds into panic, try moving somewhere quiet and focus on slow breathing together.

Suicidal thoughts

Thinking about suicide is more common than many people realise. Talking openly about these thoughts does not increase risk. It reduces it.

How you can help

- Listen without judgement.
- Ask direct but compassionate questions. Try to find out if they have plans to act on their suicidal thoughts.
- Encourage them to contact their GP or consider talking therapy.
- Acknowledge their feelings. Suicidal thoughts are a sign of distress, not failure.

If it becomes a crisis

- Contact NHS 111, option 2, for urgent mental health support and advice.
- If there is immediate risk, call 999 or go to A&E.
- Contact Samaritans on 116 123.
- Check whether they have a crisis plan or access to a crisis team.

“
I wasn't a bad person, just someone who'd lost his way.”

Ben

What you might say

“Are you having thoughts about ending your life?”

“Have you felt this way before?”

“Can we think together about what might help keep you safe right now?”

“

My arrest felt like the worst and best day of my life. It forced me to ask for help, to open up, and to realise I wasn't a bad person, just someone who'd lost his way. The people who supported me helped me rebuild a brighter, more hopeful future.”

To explain my journey, I have to go back to 28 February 2023. That was the day I was arrested – the worst and best day of my life. Worst, because no one wants to experience that. Best, because it pushed me to finally confront what I'd been carrying inside for years.

When I came home, I told my parents everything. It was the bravest and hardest thing I've ever done, but it lifted a huge weight. Over the next two weeks, guilt and shame took over, and my mental health collapsed. I realised I couldn't cope alone anymore and asked my parents to take me to the hospital. That was the first time I truly spoke about my fears and the thoughts that had been overwhelming me.

What changed everything was the consultant telling me, “You're not a bad person – just someone who lost their way.” Those words gave me my first real sense of hope.

From there, I was supported by UOK and then Rethink Mental Illness' Mendos service. Wendy from Mendos guided me through every stage of the justice process and helped me rebuild a positive mindset. I honestly believe she saved my life.

Today, I feel mentally, physically and spiritually stronger than ever. I'm living a brighter life, proud of how far I've come, and determined to keep moving forward.”

Looking after yourself

Supporting someone else can be emotionally demanding. Stress can build up over time, and your wellbeing matters too.

How you can help yourself

- Speak to your GP about how you are feeling.
- Explore relaxation techniques, exercise, meditation or peer support groups.
- Keep track of what helps you cope; a stress diary can be useful.
- Give yourself permission to rest, seek support and set boundaries.

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No-one understands how tied you are to the home or where you live when you're a carer.”

Stella

Where to find help

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

We provide practical advice on mental health and social care, mental health treatments, and laws, benefits, and advice for carers.

0808 801 0525

Normal opening hours, 9:30am-4pm, Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays. For the most up to date details on immediate/upcoming opening times, please check our 'Contacting the advice service' webpage at rethink.org.

In an emergency

- Call **999**
- Go to **A&E**
- Contact NHS 111 option 2

Samaritans

24 hours a day
116 123

More support and information

Free advice and information and guidance at: rethink.org

- Bipolar disorder
- Anxiety disorders
- Depression
- NHS mental health teams
- Stress – How to cope
- GPs and your mental health
- Supporting someone with a mental illness
- Worried about someone's mental health?
- How do I manage a panic attack?
- Suicidal thoughts – How to cope
- Suicidal thoughts – How to support someone
- Getting help in a mental health crisis
- How do I manage a panic attack?
- Getting help in a mental health crisis
- Hearing voices
- How do I manage hearing voices?
- Psychosis
- How can I improve my sleep?
- Self-harm
- How do I manage thoughts of self-harm?



Thank you

Your support and willingness to learn can mean the world to someone who is having challenges with their mental health. And always remember, you do not have to do this alone. We are here to help.

We can only do what we do with your support. Help us make sure no one is left behind when it comes to mental health.

Donate today.



We are the charity for people severely affected by mental illness, no matter what they're going through.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone: **0121 522 7007** Email: info@rethink.org

You can find us on:

