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Families find that it can be a stressful time when they are caring for someone with a mental illness. It may be difficult to find information about:

- Your loved one's illness
- The emotional impact on you and the family
- Legal aspects
- Financial aspects
- Family workers
- Where to find support and education

This guide has been produced to inform you about these issues and how to find the appropriate services to help. Hunter New England Health and various non-government organisations aim to work in partnership with family members and carers wherever possible.

Your Loved One's Illness

All clinical staff can provide you with information about mental illness. However, the need for patient confidentiality may restrict the amount of information they can give you unless your loved one provides consent.

Websites are available to give general information and useful fact sheets on mental illness. Use an internet search engine or visit sites such as:

www.mentalhealth.asn.au
www.sane.org
www.beyondblue.org.au

A range of books covering mental health issues are available from retailers or at your local library. Education programs are offered through services such as Carer Assist and ARAFMI Hunter.

Mental Health First Aid courses are run in Hunter New England region by the Schizophrenia Fellowship, Mental Health Coordinating Council and Hunter Institute of Mental Health - Informing communities about mental illness and how to cope. The general public, families and carers may all benefit from this information.

Emotional Impact on the Family

The emotional impact of caring for someone with a mental illness can be huge and long lasting. Family members may have to deal with the shock of their loved one's initial symptoms and diagnosis. There may be feelings of grief for carers experiencing loss of independence and opportunity if career and lifestyle are compromised due to severity of illness. Carers may experience guilt, as if something they have done has brought about the illness, or resentment at the impact of mental illness on the family.

Support is available through various services such as ARAFMI and Carer Assist. These services work solely with families who have a loved one with a mental illness. You can refer to the yellow pages or other sources for private counselling services that may be available or seek support through your GP.

Legal Aspects

Sometimes, behaviour associated with mental illness may trigger the need for legal intervention. Legal intervention needs to balance the rights of the person with the illness with the rights of people affected by their behaviours. Such interventions may result in compulsory involuntary treatment and/or financial management under the NSW Mental Health or Guardianship Acts.

Interventions may involve child custody matters. If you are a carer and feel that legal help is required, you can contact a carer advocate at Carer Assist or ARAFMI for information or referral to other service providers, or contact your local publicly funded legal centre.



Mental Health Carers
ARAFMI NSW Inc
Hunter Region

Family Information and Support



Navigators Guide



Financial Aspects

Mental illness may cause a person to spend money inappropriately. This can be disastrous for the person and their family. While it is important to preserve independence where possible, it is sometimes necessary to restrict the person's access to funds for their own and the family's well being.

The Mental Health Tribunal and Guardianship Tribunal may refer patients to the Office of the Protective Commissioner (OPC). The OPC will ensure the person's finances are suitable or assist with other financial and legal matters. You can call the OPC direct on 02 9265 3131 or 1300 360 466 or see www.gt.nsw.gov.au for more information.

Family Workers

New England Mental Health Services have designated family workers and social workers to meet with and work with families and carers on mental health issues. Having a family member or someone that you care for be admitted to a psychiatric hospital can be distressing for all concerned. If you would like to talk to someone or need assistance in managing the effects of a family member (or someone you care for) becoming unwell or admitted to hospital, you may find a family worker or social workers helpful

Family Workers work with individuals, couples and families including young people and children. There are family workers located in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie Community Mental Health Services. Family workers may be available to assist families and carers in the Hunter Valley and northern regions including Tamworth and Armidale.

If you would like to see a family worker or social worker please ask the nurse or doctor who is attending to your relative. You can also contact family workers direct on the numbers below, for information in your area.

Newcastle/Hunter Valley
02 4016 4538

Lake Macquarie
02 4904 9000

Where to find Information, Education and Support

Information, education and support helps you cope with care of a loved one with mental illness, understand the illness, and deal with emotional highs and lows. The organisations listed below provide information, education and support, referral to support groups in your area and other specialist services.

Carer support groups provide a supportive listening environment and forum for sharing experiences for people in similar situations. Some groups include both consumers and carers, which you may wish to clarify before attending.

Carer Assist
Newcastle 02 4925 2811
Taree 02 6551 4333
Tamworth 02 6761 3222

ARAFMI Hunter
Newcastle 02 4961 6717

Educare
Hunter New England Health
02 4921 4895 or 1300 887 776

NSW Family Services
www.nswfamilyservices.asn.au