

Understanding Mental Illness: What to Do in a Crisis

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People with serious health problems are at risk of having a crisis. This is the same for people with serious mental illnesses. A crisis can come about for many different reasons. Sometimes it can happen for no clear reason at all. Events like these can also set off a crisis:

- Stopping or refusing to take meds
- Meds no longer work or the dose needs to be changed
- Overusing drugs or alcohol
- Losing a loved one, losing a job, holidays, or physical illness

People seldom lose control all of the sudden. There are often warning signs that the family will spot long before the crisis. There may be certain kinds of behaviors that predict a crisis.

During these early stages, you can do things to avoid a full-blown crisis. Try to get your family member to visit her doctor or therapist. You may need to make the appointment yourself and drive her there.

If you haven't been able to avoid the crisis, be calm and act rationally. Accept the fact that the person has a mental illness. You are not the cause of it. These guidelines can help:

- **Don't threaten your loved one.** This may cause him to become more excited or afraid. People who are afraid may act out.
- **Don't shout.** If she's not listening, it isn't because she is ignoring you on purpose. Other voices or intense feelings may be interfering.
- **Don't criticize.** Criticizing will not make the voices go away or calm a person who is scared. It will only make the situation worse.
- **Don't argue.** The person is not having the same reality that you are.
- **Don't dare a person to act on what he is threatening to do.**
- **Don't stand over the person.** If she is sitting down, sit down too.
- **Avoid direct constant eye contact or touching the person.**
- **Follow requests the person makes if they are not risky or unreasonable.** This lets the person feel somewhat in control.
- **Don't block the doorway, but don't let the person get away.**
- **Be positive.** Even if your loved one is out of touch with reality, he will respond to your love, care and concern.

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