

# Worried about someone's mental health?

This factsheet can help you if you are worried about the mental health of a friend, relative or loved one. It explains what you can do and where to go to get help and support. It can be helpful for all mental health conditions. There is some information on helping someone who is experiencing symptoms of psychosis. To make things simpler we will use 'relative' to mean relative, friend or loved one.



KEY POINTS

- Changes in behaviour may mean someone is developing a mental illness.
- You can try and help your relative by encouraging them to get help from a doctor like a General Practitioner (GP).
- They may refuse to see a doctor. If so, you can try and ask for help yourself.
- You can try contacting the GP or local mental health services.
- It is important to look after your own emotional wellbeing too.

## This factsheet covers:

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## 1. What are the signs that someone might need help?

We all go through stressful events from time to time that can change our normal behaviour. This could be someone close to us dying, losing a job or the end of a relationship. We may feel stressed, angry or sad. These responses are all natural but they will go away.

Changes in behaviour may be a sign that someone is developing a mental illness. You may notice someone behaving differently. You may see a change over a short period of time or over a number of months.

Below are some common changes to look out for.

- Becoming anxious, irritable or confrontational
- Having mood swings
- Self-harming
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Not wanting to be around other people
- Being less able to cope with work or studies
- Problems concentrating or remembering things
- Changes in appetite- eating more or less
- Having suicidal thoughts

Someone may develop psychosis or a psychotic illness. In this case you may see more obvious changes. Psychosis is a medical term that describes symptoms such as hearing or seeing things, and having unusual beliefs that other people do not have. Someone with psychosis may:

- focus on odd ideas or beliefs,
- be suspicious and paranoid, such as thinking people are talking about them,
- believe that friends or family members want to harm them,
- think that the TV is talking to them,
- believe they are on a special mission or have special powers,
- not communicate with anyone or refuse to leave their room for days,
- have problems concentrating or remembering things, or
- stop eating, washing or dressing properly.

You can find more information about this in our '**Psychosis**' factsheet at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or contact 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you the information.

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## 2. What are the first steps?

You can try and help your relative by encouraging them to get help from a doctor like a General Practitioner (GP). You can get more information on visiting the GP in our '**What to expect from your GP**' factsheet available from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). You can also get a hard copy by calling us on 0121 522 7007.

Your relative might not want to visit their GP. They may not feel they are unwell. They may not think that a GP would be able to help them. They may realise they need help but feel too embarrassed or ashamed to talk to a doctor.

Here are some thoughts which may help you.

- Imagine how you would feel in your relative's situation. They might feel sensitive, anxious, frightened or confused.
- Remember they may feel you are 'getting at them'. Be calm, sympathetic and tactful.
- Try to bring up the subject when you are both relaxed and have time to talk.

There are some things you could tell your relative.

- Stress, anxiety or other symptoms seem to be making it hard for you to cope as well as usual, and a doctor could help.
- You can go with them to a doctor's appointment to support them.
- Many mental health problems can be easily treated. They might be worried they will have to go to hospital. This is unlikely if they get treatment.
- GP notes are confidential. This means that the doctor can't share information with anyone else unless they agree to it. The GP may have to share information with others if they feel someone is at risk of harming themselves.

You can find more information about:

- Dealing with unusual thoughts and behaviours
- Supporting someone with a mental illness

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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### **3. How can I ask for help?**

Your relative may refuse to see a doctor. If so, you can try and ask for help yourself.

#### **GP**

If you know the details of their GP you can write a letter to them. Explain your concerns clearly, try to stick to facts and give examples. Keeping a diary might help. You could make a list of concerns. There are some examples below.

- My daughter has left college because she believes all the staff are talking about her. She has stopped talking to all her friends. She won't turn her phone on because she thinks that people can watch her through her phone.

- My son does not come out of his room except to get food when we are all asleep. He hasn't washed for over 2 weeks. He avoids all of us. If he walks into the kitchen and someone is there he runs back into his bedroom. He keeps his door locked and won't talk to us.
- My wife has started self-harming and takes a lot of time off work at the moment. She has started buying a lot of packets of tablets and storing them, I found them and she got really angry with me for throwing them away. She gets so angry and starts smashing up the house. Every time I leave the house to go to work she starts crying and doesn't want me to go.

Evidence of any changes in behaviour might also be useful. For example, your relative may have sent you an email, letter or text that seems odd or distressing.

You should tell the GP if there is a history of mental illness in the family.

The GP might invite you to make an appointment to discuss your letter. You could try to make an appointment yourself. It is better to give facts and examples rather than opinions or vague descriptions.

Sometimes a GP may contact your relative to invite them for a check up or they may agree to do a home visit.

### **Community Mental Health Team (CMHT)**

A Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) is made up of professionals like psychiatrists, psychologists and community psychiatric nurses (CPNs).

Your relative will need a referral from their GP to get help from the CMHT. A referral is when someone passes your details to a team or service so you can make an appointment to see them.

You can check if your local CMHT will accept self referrals. You can check this on the local mental health trust website or we could try to check this for you.

Even if you cannot refer your relative to the CMHT, you can write to them explaining your concerns. However, the CMHT may say they cannot get involved.

If the CMHT already supports your relative it should be easier for you to share your concerns.

### **Early Intervention Team**

Early intervention teams treat and support people who are experiencing psychosis for the first time. They are for people aged between 14 and 35 years old.

If someone has psychosis and does not get treatment for a long time they are more likely to develop long-term problems. This can include becoming unwell again, having relationship problems or not being able to work or study.<sup>1</sup>

This makes it important to try get medical help for someone if you think they are developing psychosis or a psychotic illness. Getting help sooner rather than later can:

- improve how quickly and how much a person recovers,
- reduce the likelihood of becoming unwell again or admission to hospital,
- reduce time lost from work, school or college, and
- reduce stress on family and friends.

Usually your relative will need a referral to get help from the early intervention team. GPs can refer someone to this sort of team.

Sometimes early intervention teams will also accept self referrals or referrals from friends and family. You can usually check this on the local mental health trust website or we could try to check this for you.

Even if you cannot refer your relative you can write to them explaining your concerns. However, the early intervention team may say they cannot get involved. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that everyone experiencing psychosis for the first time should be offered a referral to a CMHT or early intervention service.<sup>2</sup> It might be worth pointing this out to the doctor if the person you know is experiencing symptoms of psychosis.

You can find more information about:

- Community Mental Health Teams
- Early intervention teams

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

If your loved one has become very unwell, you may wish to explore the options in our '**Getting Help in a Crisis**' factsheet available from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).

### **Things to remember**

- It can be useful to give a doctor information on your relative's health as they may decide to seek help later on. This might help shape the questions the doctor might ask them.
- If you share concerns about your relative with professionals they may tell your relative this. This can have an impact on trust in your relationship. If you share concerns verbally or in writing you could request that this is kept confidential and used as sensitively as possible. You could explain that this is to protect your relationship.
- Some doctors say that listening to the concerns of others about a patient breaches their duty of confidentiality. This is not true. Confidentiality rules do not prevent a doctor listening to your concerns.<sup>3</sup>
- A doctor or mental health team will need permission from your relative to share their personal information with you. You can still

share concerns without this. However, professionals will be limited in what they can tell you. This includes what they will do with your information.

- You may not know which GP surgery your relative is registered with. If you ask a surgery if your relative is a patient there the surgery will not usually be able to tell you this. If your relative has given them permission to share information they would be able to tell you.

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#### **4. How can I ask for help outside the NHS?**

##### **Voluntary services or organisations**

If your relative doesn't want to get help from a doctor you can check if there are any voluntary services in the area. Sometimes people are more open to getting help from this sort of service. A voluntary service, like a local charity, may feel less 'clinical' than a GP surgery.

Although voluntary services can provide some treatments such as talking therapies, they can't give medical help. But staff from voluntary organisations may have contact with NHS mental health services. They could let mental health services know that someone is unwell and needs an assessment. Mental health services might give extra weight to information from voluntary services.

##### **Social services**

You can ask social services to carry out a 'community care assessment' of your relative. Community care means getting help from the Local Authority (LA) for social care needs. This could be things like having support in the home or in getting out of the house. Social services have a legal duty to carry out a 'community care assessment' under the Care Act 2014. This means that if you ask for your relative to be assessed, they must carry this out by law.<sup>4</sup>

The assessment will usually be carried out by a social worker, or other people from the LA social services department.

The LA can get other services to do assessments and give your relative support and care.<sup>5</sup> They may do this if they think the other service has more experience in your relative's area of need.<sup>6</sup> For example, they may ask a community mental health team to do an assessment with them.

You can find out more information about:

- Social Care- Care support and planning
- Social care- assessment and eligibility

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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## 5. How can I help someone who is not a friend, relative or loved one?

You may be worried about the mental health of someone you don't know very well. This may be someone like a housemate, neighbour or tenant. You might not know who to contact. It is likely that you won't know the details of the person's GP. If you feel someone may be having a mental health crisis you can contact social services and tell them. You can look for adult social services on your council's website. You can contact us and we can try to find this information for you. Each council has a social care team. They often have a number you can call outside of normal office hours.

### Safeguarding

You may be concerned that someone is at risk because of their mental health. If you think someone is being abused you can report this to the adult safeguarding team, in social services. There are many different types of abuse. This includes:

- physical,
- sexual,
- emotional,
- financial, and
- organisational abuse.

If someone is not looking after themselves this may be neglect. You can tell the safeguarding team about this. You can find the details of the adult safeguarding team on your council website, or we can look for this information for you.

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## 6. What are some common problems I might encounter?

Doctors and other NHS professionals may expect the person who is unwell to approach them directly. This can be a barrier as you can't force someone to get help even if they are unwell. Doctors should take on board and listen to your concerns. In some cases they may try to arrange a home visit so that your friend or relative can be assessed.

You can ask at reception if any of the doctors have special experience in working with people with mental health problems.

A doctor or other health professional may agree to make contact with your relative. However, they can't be forced to accept treatment unless they are detained or 'sectioned' under the Mental Health Act. Someone can only be detained under the Mental Health Act if they are a serious risk to themselves or others, because of their mental health. You can find out more about the '**Mental Health Act**' at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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## 7. How can I get help for myself?

Trying to get help for someone who is unwell can be stressful.

You can access carer services if you are supporting someone who is unwell. You do not need to be registered as a carer. Carer support services and groups offer support for many carers across the UK. They can be a way to meet others and get support, information and advice. You can find details of some carers services in the 'Useful contacts' section below.

You could also ask your local council's social services department for a 'carer's assessment'. Someone would then assess you to see if you need services, which could include respite care.

You can find more information, including where to find local carers services and how to get a carers assessment, in our factsheets '**Supporting someone with a mental illness**' and '**Carers' Assessments**'. You can download these from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). You can also call 0300 5000 927 and request that hard copies are sent to you.

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### **Carers UK**

Provides an advice line, online support carers groups throughout the UK.

**Telephone:** 0808 808 7777

**Address:** 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX

**Email:** [info@carersuk.org](mailto:info@carersuk.org)

**Website:** [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

### **Carers Trust**

A charity which offers practical advice about caring for someone via their website and online forums. Provides information about local support.

**Address:** 32–36 Loman Street, London, SE1 0EH

**Email:** [support@carers.org](mailto:support@carers.org)

**Website:** [www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)

**Samaritans** Confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

**Telephone:** 116 123 (24 hours, every day)

**Address:** Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA

**Email:** [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

**Website:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### **Sane Line**

Specialist emotional support and information to anyone affected by mental illness.

**Telephone:** 0300 304 7000 (6-11pm everyday)

**Textphone:** [Online form](#)  
**Website:** [www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

**Support Line**

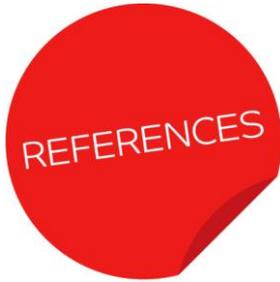
Confidential emotional support for children, young adults and adults.

**Telephone:** 01708 765200 (hours vary so ring for details)

**Address:** Support Line, PO Box 2860, Romford, Essex RM7 1JA

**Email:** [info@supportline.org.uk](mailto:info@supportline.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.supportline.org.uk](http://www.supportline.org.uk)



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<sup>1</sup> Bertolote, J. & McGorry, P. (2005) Early intervention and recovery for young people with early psychosis: consensus statement. British Journal of Psychiatry, 187, s116-119.

<sup>2</sup> Schizophrenia, Core interventions in the treatment and management of Clinical Excellence, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Confidentiality, Guidance for Doctors; General Medical Council, 2009

<sup>4</sup> s. 9 Care Act 2014, c.23

<sup>5</sup> As note 4 s79

<sup>6</sup> As note 4, para 18.1 - 18.3



This factsheet is available  
in large print.

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## Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927  
Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

### or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback  
PO Box 68795  
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 10am to 2pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better  
quality of life for everyone  
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0121 522 7007  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

 [facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)

 [twitter.com/rethink\\_](https://twitter.com/rethink_)

 [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### Need more help?

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

### Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

### Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to [www.rethink.org/donate](http://www.rethink.org/donate) or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.

