

Caring for someone with a serious mental illness?

Try our ten point plan!

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www.hafal.org



When you first become a carer for a person with a serious mental illness it can feel a bit alarming. But there's good news: serious mental illnesses are very treatable and everyone with a serious mental illness can take steps towards recovery. Carers can take a positive role in this process.

This plan is based on the tips we've had from over 400 carer Members at Hafal. It's based on real experience. The plan sets out the positive steps you can take as a carer to move forward and support the person you care for.

***Note:** In this plan we refer to the person you care for as the “**patient**” but we realise that this may sound impersonal and you may prefer to think in terms of the **individual**.*

the ten point plan

1. Get the right information

An important step to becoming a successful carer is to understand the patient's illness as much as possible. The better you understand the illness, the better you'll be able to support the patient. Most important of all is to [keep up a dialogue with the patient](#) and ask them about their experience of the illness: a patient's experience of illness is particular to them and they are the best source of information. In addition there will almost always be familiar symptoms which are described in information elsewhere: [talk to your GP](#), [read Hafal's leaflets on schizophrenia or bipolar disorder](#), and [use the internet or your local library](#) to gain a better understanding of mental illness.

2. Get the support you need to be a carer

Make sure you get the support you need as a carer, especially from your GP and Community Mental Health Team. [Ask you local social services department for a Carer's Assessment](#): this will identify where you need help and who can provide you with that help. It is important not to attempt to do everything for the patient: work with the relevant agencies to agree what you are prepared to do and how that will fit in with what **they** need to do to help the patient.



3. Work alongside health and social care agencies

Aim to build a positive, supportive relationship with the professional agencies. Working alongside these agencies will enable you to be clear about what things **you** can help the patient with, and what **they** can help the patient with. When you think health and social care agencies are not doing what they should, you can advocate strongly for the patient – but in a courteous and constructive way. There may be times when you feel let down by the professionals but try to see matters from their point of view and **always keep communication going!**



4. Look after yourself

Sacrificing your own wellbeing won't do you or the patient any favours. Try to enjoy a good quality of life for your own benefit and to provide a good example to the patient. We advise that you **enjoy an active social life, find time to follow your own interests and work to maintain your own health**. It is particularly important to look after both your physical health and mental health – don't be ashamed to take trouble to protect and improve your own well-being. If you find it hard to achieve this, talk to health and social care agencies and see how they can support you.

5. Let the patient find their own way

When someone has a serious mental illness it's tempting to make a lot of decisions for them. But to really help the patient you should let them find their own way forward as far as possible. You can do this by **supporting them to exercise rights and responsibilities and make their own choices**. This can be challenging and frustrating and it can mean taking risks. But this is necessary as the patient takes steps towards becoming more independent and achieving recovery. However, there are times when you may need to...

6. ...Intervene in an emergency

In point 5 we talk about supporting the patient to take control of their own life. But there are exceptions to this: although you should try as far as possible to let the patient find their own way, don't hesitate to follow your instincts if you think urgent assistance is needed. If you suspect that the patient or anyone else is at risk of harm (including yourself) then we advise you to **ring the duty social worker and/or police to get a rapid response**. It is especially important not to hold back because you are worried about being a nuisance or because of previous "false alarms" – if **you** think urgent assistance is needed then get help fast! It's a good idea to keep phone numbers handy too.

7. Take a break

In order to do the best job you can as a carer it is important that you get breaks from your caring commitments. These should include both regular breaks and longer holidays from caring. [Be clear with the Community Mental Health Team, the GP and other health and social care agencies about this and ask for their cooperation in supporting you to take breaks.](#)

There may be specific local services you can access – see the “Getting more information” section opposite for more details.



8. Know your rights

As a carer you have rights. One of the most important rights is to have a Carer’s Assessment where social services look at your situation and decide if you are entitled to any support. [If you haven’t had an assessment yet, contact your local social services department and ask for one.](#) Under the Mental Health Act, which applies to patients who receive compulsory treatment, the ‘Nearest Relative’ also has a number of legal rights including the right to receive written information about the patient’s detention. One of the main frustrations for carers are the barriers created by confidentiality. The patient does of course have rights to confidentiality which you will have to respect: however, if you are blocked from information or involvement by professionals on grounds of confidentiality then take advice from a carer’s advocate – don’t take no for an answer especially if you think risks could arise from you not knowing what is going on. For more details see the “Getting more information” section opposite.

9. Get financial help

Whether you are in work or have a full-time caring role it is essential to make sure you get all the financial help you are entitled to. Carers have access to a range of benefits. Carer’s Allowance is the main benefit specifically for carers. However, you may also qualify for other benefits not specific to your caring role. To make sure you are receiving all the financial support you are entitled to, [get a benefits check.](#) Contact your local Citizen’s Advice Bureau for more advice.

10. Focus on recovery

It’s important for the carer to [help the patient to focus on recovery](#) and not simply coping with a mental illness. Recovery means taking short steps towards long-term goals and achieving the best possible quality of life. Hafal’s 1,000+ Members have found that recovery depends on three essential things which we list below.

- 1. Empowerment and Self-management:** this means helping the patient to make their own choices and decisions and to *act* on those decisions.
- 2. Commitment to Progress:** this means helping the patient to plan ahead and actively take steps to improve their life.
- 3. Whole Person Approach:** this means helping the patient to address key aspects of life which contribute to wellbeing. These include medical treatment; other forms of treatment including psychological interventions; personal care and physical wellbeing; training and education; finance and money; parenting or caring relationships; social, cultural and spiritual aspects; accommodation, including housing; and work and occupation.

Hafal has developed a Recovery Programme that enables people to look at all areas of life and take a step-by-step approach to recovery. For more information please get in touch.

Getting more information

- For more information on services in your area for carers of people with serious mental illness please see the local Hafal numbers below. For information on recovery please go to www.hafal.org/hafal/recovery or call Hafal Head Office on **01792 816 600** and ask for a guide to recovery. You can also email us at hafal@hafal.org
- To find out about getting a benefits check contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau (you can search for your local branch at www.citizensadvice.org.uk). For general advice about benefits visit www.dwp.gov.uk or contact your local Jobcentre Plus. The main Jobcentre Plus UK number is **0800 055 6688**; a textphone service is available if you have a speech or hearing impairment on **0800 023 4888**. The website can be found at: www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk
- For information on breaks for carers please contact your local council.
- For more details on the rights of the Nearest Relative under the Mental Health Act please visit www.mentalhealthwales.net/mhw/legal
- Information on Carers Rights can also be found on the Carers Wales website at www.carerswales.org/Information (an advice service is available via telephone on **0808 808 7777**).



Support for **mental health carers** in Wales

Hafal is Wales' principal charity run by people with serious mental illness and their carers. We provide a variety of services for carers including family support, advocacy, breaks for carers, accessible information and advice, carers' groups and campaigning. In 2004 Hafal set up the groundbreaking All-Wales Mental Health Carers Forum to give carers across Wales the opportunity to discuss their concerns and voice them at a national level. **For more information on our carers' services in your county, please get in touch with your local office:**

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