Disclosing to Others

Ideally, the people around you will understand your illness and encourage you. But it’s also possible they might not know much about mental illness at all. They may want to help you, but not know how. You can give friends and family a better chance to help by thinking ahead about how to tell them you live with mental illness. Telling others about your condition is called “disclosing.”

Maybe you have mixed feelings. You might be afraid that loved ones will judge you or start to feel uncomfortable around you. Try writing a list of pros and cons. The pros can remind you of the rewards of overcoming your fears. To help get you started, the first reason to tell family and friends about your mental illness can be to receive encouragement. Simply talking to someone who understands can reduce your stress levels, improve your mood and inspire you to keep going.

Also consider making a list of the people you're considering telling. Look over the list on your own or with your therapist, and really consider each person. Which of your friends and family are the most skillful at offering understanding? Which ones are the best at listening or giving a hug when you’re down? Which ones do you feel comfortable talking to about almost anything?

Generally, the outcome of opening up about mental illness goes one of three ways:

- The person is genuinely comfortable with your disclosure and things stay the same
- The person is uncomfortable and ends the relationship
- The person says they are fine with it, but then fades from your life

Once you've told someone, you'll understandably be concerned about their reaction. If you continue to get the same "vibes" from someone after you disclose, you can be fairly sure that this information has not changed the relationship. Friends stay friends. Colleagues stay polite. That is the best outcome of all.

And while some people may disappear from your life, it's better to have strong social supports around you than people who can't accept you as you are.

When to Tell

There's no right or wrong way to disclose. There’s no correct number of people to tell. And there’s no “perfect time” to disclose. Some individuals might be brief. Others might want to explain their entire history. Some benefit from telling many family and friends. Others may only tell a couple of close loved ones. You are the expert on your own mental illness journey and can decide for yourself.

Timing often feels tricky. Sometimes it can feel “weird” or “random” to just start talking about mental illness one day. Here are some factors that might help you consider when to disclose:
When you need to give context. You may tell a loved one because they've expressed concern about your behaviors. You may tell a friend so they can understand why you sometimes can’t spend time with them. You may tell your employer to receive accommodations.

When you feel a symptom flare coming. It’s a good idea to disclose when you’re well — especially if you feel like an increase in symptoms is about to happen. This helps provide a calm environment to introduce your loved one to your illness and prepare them for the difficult period ahead.

When you’re ready. Disclosing is a very personal decision. It might help to practice disclosure with your therapist. You can discuss any worries you may have and plan for questions or comments that might arise.

How to Start
While the timing of this conversation can often feel random — or, at times, forced or unexpected — planning for how you will handle it is key. Consider including three items:

1. "Process" Talk
2. Concrete Examples
3. Suggestions on How to Help

"Process" Talk means "talking about talking," rather than talking to share information. This kind of conversation usually happens when you are first getting started. Prepare your loved one for an important discussion by saying something like:

- "I want to talk to you about something important. I'm not sure how to talk about it, though. Can you listen to me and try to understand?"
- "There's something going on in my life that's bothering me. I think I need to talk to someone about it. I feel embarrassed, though, so please don't laugh it off."
- "I'm not sure if this will make sense. I feel uncomfortable talking about it, but I want to talk to someone."

Concrete Examples of what you mean by "mental illness." Each person’s experience with mental illness is different, and everybody has a different interpretation of what their illness “looks like.” So, share one or two examples of what specifically is causing you stress:

- "I think something's wrong because I can't sleep more than a couple hours at night. I'm worried I'll stop leaving the apartment if I don't get help."
- "The doctor said I have bipolar disorder. Sometimes I feel like my emotions are getting out of control and I'm not sure how to keep myself together."
• “I want you to know that I have borderline personality disorder. Before you look it up online, I want you to know how the illness presents for me.”

**Suggestions on How to Help.** Family and friends may not know what they can do to help. Suggest specific actions they can take that will help you:

• "I'm scared to make an appointment because that's admitting something's wrong. Can you help me schedule one and follow through?"
• "I'm not supposed to drink alcohol with my medications. I'm going to try not to drink at parties, but I need my close friends to encourage me and help me keep my social life."
• "I'm feeling better. But occasionally, can you tell me you're there for me and give me a hug?"

**Remember...**

**You don't have to share everything.** Decide in advance what parts of your experience you'll talk about and what parts you won't. It's okay to answer a question with a statement like, "I'd rather not talk about that right now."

**Make sure to share the good things.** Explain how your illness has taught you new things about yourself or about experiences you might've had despite, or because of, your illness.

**Set boundaries.** Be clear about when you want advice and when you want a listening ear. Also realize that people come with their own opinions — informed and otherwise — so be patient when explaining. If they try to discredit you, gently remind them that you are the one living with the illness, and you know yourself best.

Most importantly, as you tell the right people and suggest ways they can help, keep in mind that you are building a strong support network. And support networks are a significant part of mental health recovery.

Putting yourself out there, being vulnerable, trusting others with this personal information about you is hard, but you might discover that many people want to help you — and the benefits will far outweigh the risks.