

Ask Miriam...

Individuals and families in the community are faced with challenging issues and concerns regarding their social, emotional and psychological health. Through the cooperation of **The Jewish World**, Miriam Adler of the Jewish Family Services will offer responses.

I have received several letters relating to mental illness and how friends and relatives should respond to difficult and often upsetting episodes with their loved ones. The following letter is representative.

Q. Dear Miriam,

My sister has been mentally ill since she was a young adult. She was in college when she became ill and was hospitalized. She is now in her 50s.

There have been some long periods when she was ok and gainfully employed. However, there have been many hospitalizations. The hospitalizations seem to be getting closer together.

She hasn't been able to work at all in the last five years and lives on her disability check.

She is ok as long as she takes her medications, but as soon as she feels better, she stops taking them and the downward spiral starts.

As long as our parents were alive, she had a safety net. They would bail her out financially and provide a place to stay when necessary.

I understand that she is having a lot of trouble managing, but I can't take on the responsibility of caring for her. At the same time I feel guilty about not being able to do more. Are there sources of help in the community for her?

Caring Sister

A. Dear Caring Sister,

Your problem is a complex one. Two of the main issues are resources for your sis-

ter and your own feelings of responsibility.

There are resources in a community for people with persistent and chronic mental illness. However, connection to the systems is voluntary unless the person is in danger to him/herself or to others.

It is not uncommon for people who have been part of a system to leave and refuse to accept ongoing services. He or she may then ask for help from relatives, friends or from other community institutions such as synagogues, Jewish Family Services, etc. That kind of help is limited.

The most difficult issue is for a relative or friend to be able to set limits and have boundaries. If a loved one is asking for unreasonable assistance, it is ok to set limits. You are not responsible for the mental illness, nor are you able to make his/her life normal.

The balance comes in realizing and accepting your own ability to help and being able to say no. You can help the person try to get back into a system for assistance, but no one, even professionals, can force anyone to accept that which they don't want, even if it appears to be in their own best interest. Sometimes, by refusing help, you may force the person into getting the appropriate sources of help from the community.

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Miriam Adler, A.C.S.W., C.S.W., is assistant director of J.F.S. She answers most frequently asked questions. Please send questions to "Ask Miriam," c/o Jewish Family Services of NENY, 877 Madison Ave., Albany, NY 12208 or e-mail madler@jfsneny.org or call 518-482-8856.

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