

Dear Families and Friends of our Patients,

We work in the BWFH Psychiatry Department as “peers.” That means we have lived experience of serious mental illness and have had recovery. Our role here is to communicate with patients our hope for them, to listen compassionately to what has brought them to treatment, and to support them by sharing coping skills we have learned to meet the challenges folks can face having mental illnesses.

We are writing to family and friends of our patients to discuss mental illness, to provide you with resources you might benefit from as you navigate this rough road with your loved one, and to mention a couple of ways loved ones can be of help to patients who are in crisis.

First, mental illness is a medical condition just like any other illness. It affects mood, thoughts, cognition and/or behavior. Mental illness is nobody's fault – not any patient, any family member or friend. We encourage you to learn whatever you can about the illness your loved one suffers from. Oftentimes, your loved one will be a great resource for that information. You can also find a lot of information on line. One resource we recommend is [NAMI.org](http://NAMI.org). NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness. In addition, you can seek information from a clinician on the unit with the patient's permission. Or, you can join a support group for family members. The best ones we know of are facilitated by local NAMI members. You can find one near you or on Zoom at [NAMI-mass.org](http://NAMI-mass.org).

Second, with treatment, most people with a mental illness can experience recovery and live full lives in the community. Our experience is that the recovery process is difficult and challenging, both the treatment itself and finding the resources and support needed to make recovery possible. Despite these challenges, we have found satisfying relationships with friends and family, live independently, and are involved positively in the community. We have confidence that your loved one will, over time, find the right combination of medication, treatment, coping skills, and life structure to facilitate recovery.

Most importantly, in addition to caring for yourself through this process, you can support your loved one by doing the following:

- 1. Visit.** Zoom, chat, call, or send cards. If you are able, come to the unit in person, if the patient says they are up to it and they are able to have visitors. Please call 617-983-7211 for more information. The address to send a card is: BWFH, 2 South, 1153 Centre Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130. These contacts are a really important source of support for patients in the hospital. Do ask if they need anything while in the hospital, like a book or magazine or a small snack. You might bring slippers or Crocs, or toiletries in plastic bottles. You can also bring fun activities, like a puzzle or coloring book and we have many such supplies here too that you and your loved one might enjoy.
- 2. Listen and Validate.** Generally, patients feel supported if they are listened to and their experience is validated. You do not need to offer advice. Just tell them you care, patiently offer them hope, and respect their boundaries.

We wish you the very best as you support your family member or friend during this difficult time.

Patty Mulcahy, Certified Peer Specialist  
Judith Ashton, Peer Volunteer