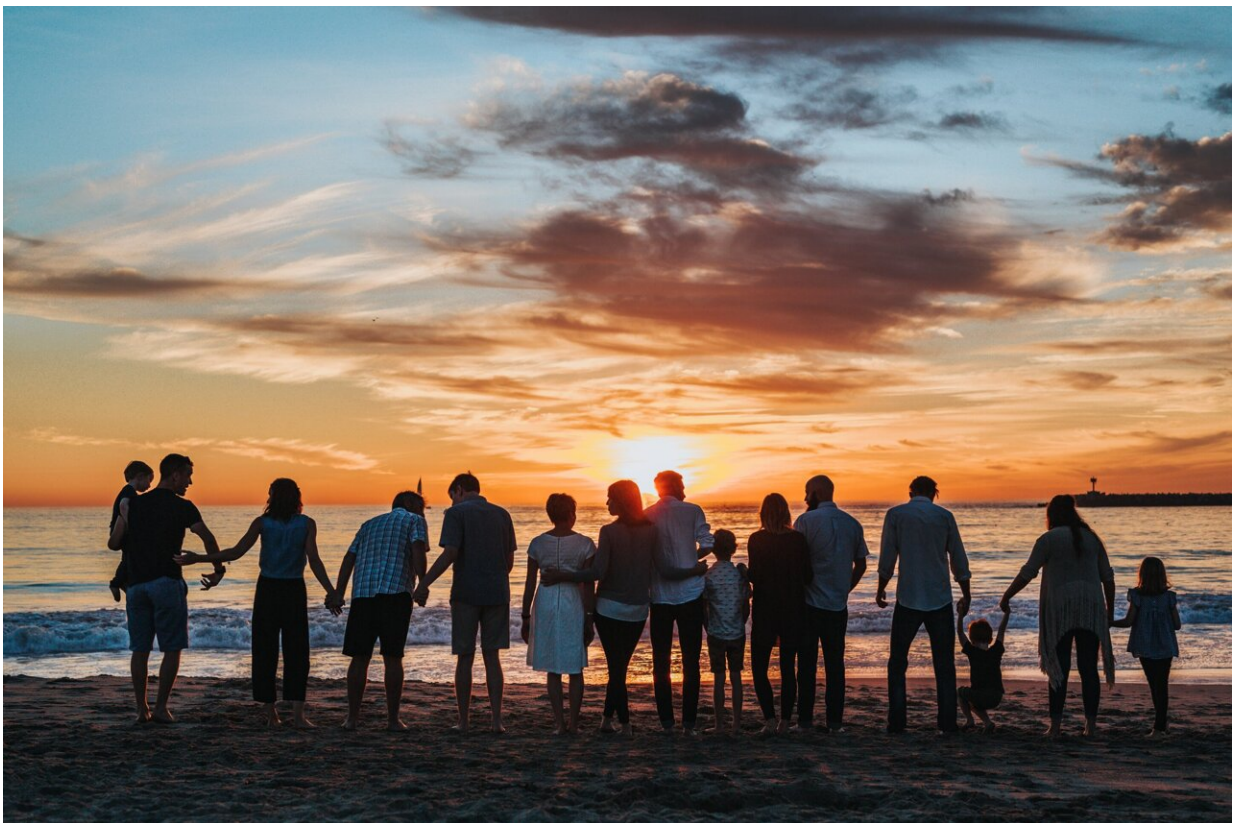


Families including someone with mental illness can experience deep despair—they need support

April 17 2024, by Amanda Cole



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In the aftermath of the tragic Bondi knife attack, Joel Cauchi's parents have [spoken](#) about their son's long history of mental illness, having been diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 17. They said they were "devastated and horrified" by their son's actions. "To you he's a monster," said his father. "But to me he was a very sick boy."

Globally, one out of every eight people [report a mental illness](#). In Australia, [one in five people experience a mental illness](#) in their lifetime.

Mental illness and distress affects not only the person living with the condition, but [family members and communities](#). As the prevalence of mental health problems grows, the flow-on effect to family members, including caregivers, and the impact on families as a unit, is also rising.

While every family is different, the words of the Cauchis draw attention to how families can experience distress, stress, fear, powerlessness, and still love, despite the challenges and trauma. How can they help a loved one? And who can they turn to for support?

The role of caregivers

Informal caregivers help others [within the context of an existing relationship](#), such as a family member. The care they provide goes beyond the usual expectations or demands of such relationships.

Around [2.7 million Australians](#) provide informal care. For almost a third of these the person's primary medical diagnosis is psychological or psychiatric.

It has [long been acknowledged](#) that those supporting a family member with ongoing mental illness need support themselves.

In the 1980s, interest grew in caregiving dynamics within families of people grappling with mental health issues. Subsequent research recognized [chronic health conditions](#) not only affect the quality of life and well-being of the people experiencing them, but also impose burdens that reverberate within relationships, caregiving roles, and family dynamics over time.

Past studies have shown families of those diagnosed with chronic mental illness are increasingly forced to [manage their own depression](#), experience elevated levels of [emotional stress](#), negative states of mind and [decreased overall mental health](#).

Conditions such as depression, [anxiety disorders](#), bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia can severely impact daily functioning, relationships, and [overall quality of life](#). Living with mental illness is often accompanied by a myriad of challenges. From stigma and discrimination to difficulty accessing adequate health care and [support services](#). Patients and their families navigate a complex and often isolating journey.

The family is a system

The concept of [family health](#) acknowledges the physical and psychological well-being of a person is significantly affected by the family.

Amid these challenges, [family support](#) emerges as a beacon of hope. Research consistently demonstrates strong familial relationships and support systems play a pivotal role in mitigating the adverse effects of mental illness. Families provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging that are vital for people struggling with mental illness.

My recent [research](#) highlights the profound impact of mental illness on

family dynamics, emphasizing the resilience and endurance shown by participants. Families struggling with mental illness often experience heightened emotional fluctuations, with extreme highs and lows. The enduring nature of family caregiving entails both stress and adaptation over an extended period. Stress associated with caregiving and the demands on personal resources and coping mechanisms builds and builds.

Yet families I've [interviewed](#) find ways to live "a good life". They prepare for the peaks and troughs, and show endurance and persistence. They make space for mental illness in their daily lives, describing how it spurs adaptation, acceptance and inner strength within the family unit.

When treating a person with mental illness, health practitioners need to consider the entire family's needs and engage with family members. By fostering open and early dialogue and providing comprehensive support, health-care professionals can empower families to navigate the complexities of mental illness while fostering resilience and hope for the future. Family members [express stories](#) of an inner struggle, isolation and exhaustion.

Shifting the focus

There is a pressing need for a shift in research priorities, from illness-centered perspectives to a [strengths-based focus](#) when considering families "managing" mental illness.

There is transformative potential in harnessing strengths to respond to challenges posed by mental illnesses, while also [supporting family members](#).

For people facing mental health challenges, having [loved ones who listen without judgment](#) and offer empathy can alleviate feelings of despair.

Beyond emotional support, families often serve as crucial caregivers, assisting with [daily tasks, medication management and navigating the health-care system](#).

As the Cauchi family so painfully articulated, providing support for a family member with mental illness is intensely challenging. Research [shows](#) caregiver burnout, financial strain and strained relationships are common.

Health-care professionals should prioritize support for [family members](#) at an early stage. In Australia, there are various support options available for families living with mental illness. [Caregiver Gateway](#) provides information, support and access to services. [Headspace](#) offers mental health services and supports to young people and their families.

Beyond these national services, GPs, nurses, nurse practitioners, and local community health centers are key to early conversations. Mental health clinics and hospitals often target family involvement in treatment plans.

While Australia has made strides in recognizing the importance of family support, challenges persist. Access to services can vary based on geographic location and demand, leaving some families under-served or facing long wait times. And the level of funding and resources allocated to family-oriented mental health support often does not align with the demand or complexity of need.

In the realm of [mental illness](#), family support serves as a lifeline for people navigating the complexities of their conditions.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Families including someone with mental illness can experience deep despair—they need support (2024, April 17) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-04-families-mental-illness-deep-despair.html>

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