

TIPS FOR NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

Navigating the mental health system can be overwhelming, confusing and stressful.

Here are some suggestions offered by individuals and caregivers who have gone through similar experiences which may help you along the way:

Documentation

Keep records and ongoing documentation of you and/or your relative's experiences and interactions with the system. Write down names, dates, addresses, phone numbers, circumstances, treatment modalities (including medications and dosages) and their effectiveness, along with any of your own observations.

Listen attentively when dealing with any professionals and try to clarify any information you don't understand.

Build Rapport with Professionals

When speaking to someone, try to build a rapport with them by remaining calm and being appreciative of the help you have been given. If the professional is not sharing information or not treating you in a respectful manner, acknowledge their limitations and consider moving on to someone else. There are many compassionate support staff that are truly concerned about your care and/or your relative's care and realize that you can make their job easier by keeping them informed.

So be polite, consistent and firm; you want to try to build positive relationships with anyone and everyone who is involved in your and/or your relative's care.

Educate Yourself

Understanding the mental health and addictions system can help you feel more confident, informed, and prepared as you move through it. Take time to learn how the system works, who the key players are, and what each one can offer. This knowledge makes it easier to ask useful questions, make informed decisions, and advocate for meaningful support.

Learn How the System Works

Become familiar with the different parts of the mental health and addictions system, including hospitals, community agencies, crisis teams, outpatient programs, and specialized services.

Learn the usual steps involved in accessing support, such as referrals, intake appointments, waitlists, and assessments.

Understanding the system's limitations can help you set realistic expectations and reduce frustration.

Know Who the Players Are

There are many professionals involved in mental health and addictions care. Each one has a different role, and knowing what they do helps you understand who to approach for what.

Examples include:

Family doctors and nurse practitioners provide assessments, prescriptions, and referrals.

Psychiatrists diagnose and treat more complex mental health conditions and often require a referral.

Social workers, case managers, and counsellors offer therapy, coordination, and practical support.

Peer support workers provide emotional support and guidance based on lived experience.

Crisis workers and mobile crisis teams respond to emergencies and safety concerns.

Hospital and emergency department staff help manage acute episodes and connect people to follow up care.

Understand What They Can Do to Help

Learn what each professional is responsible for and what kinds of decisions they can make.

Ask questions that help you understand the process. For example:

“What are my options?”

“What usually happens next?”

“Who should I contact if things get worse?”

When you understand the roles of different providers, you can direct concerns to the right person and avoid unnecessary confusion.

Use Reliable Sources

Look for information from reputable organizations, local health networks, and official service directories. Be cautious about misinformation from unverified online sources, especially during stressful moments.

Get Help Now

1-855-449-9949 / support@iamentalhealth.ca