SECURE CORTEX
Helping organisations thrive.

Supporting a family member



A guide to supporting a family member or friend.

> Practical care, lasting support.
>
> *Supporting families with heart.*

Listen
Be present and really listen.

Support
Show empathy and offer understanding.

Encourage
Help them explore options and resources.

Connect
Remind them they are not alone.

Stronger together.
Small conversations can make a big difference.

People. Connection. Impact.

Why This Matters



Sometimes the smallest support can make the biggest difference.

Thank you for downloading this guide. If you're here, it means you care deeply about someone in your family who may be feeling overwhelmed, struggling with their mental health, or simply going through a difficult time.

This guide will give you practical, evidence-based advice to help you provide support in a way that feels natural, respectful and empowering. You don't need to be a counsellor or mental health expert, you just need to care enough to be there.

This guide will help you:

Understand
Learn more about mental health and what someone might be experiencing.

Build confidence
Know what to say and do, and how to have supportive conversations.

Find practical ideas
Discover simple ways to support them day to day.

Look after yourself
Learn how to set boundaries and maintain your own wellbeing.

Because when families feel supported,
we all grow stronger together.

Understanding & Empathy



Mental health struggles are real and they are valid.

Mental health difficulties can be just as debilitating as physical health problems. They are not a sign of weakness and they are not something your family member is choosing to feel.

Compassion, understanding and patience can go a long way in helping them feel supported, accepted and less alone.

You don't need to fully understand what they are going through to be able to support them. What matters most is that you listen, believe them and show that you care.

What understanding and empathy look like

Listen without judgement
Give them time to talk and let them share their thoughts and feelings.

Show you believe them
Take what they say seriously and acknowledge that their feelings are real.

Learn about their experience
Find out more about their specific mental health condition if they feel comfortable sharing.

Be patient
There may be good days and difficult days. Recovery is not always linear.

Focus on what you can do
You don't need all the answers. Small, consistent support can make a big difference.

Respect their feelings
Avoid minimising their experiences or comparing them to others.

You don't have to fully understand their journey.
You just need to meet them with kindness and care.

The Power of Being There



Sometimes just being there can make a real difference.

Kindness, patience and gentle reassurance can help your family member feel loved, supported and less alone. Your presence can offer comfort and stability at a time when they may be feeling overwhelmed.

A family member or close friend often provides a unique kind of support. While professional help is important, your everyday support can make a real and lasting difference.

You can't fix their problems, but you can be a steady and caring presence. That in itself can be incredibly powerful.

The positive impact of your support

Reduces isolation
Helps them feel less alone and more connected.

Provides a safe space
Lets them talk openly without fear of judgement.

Encourages help seeking
Can give them confidence to access professional support when they are ready.

Maintains normality
Helps keep routines and familiar activities going where possible.

Builds confidence
Reinforces their self worth and reminds them they are not a burden.

Offers hope
Small moments of connection can bring light to difficult days and remind them things can get better.

Your presence matters more than you might realise.

Sometimes the most powerful support is simply being there.

What to Say (and What to Avoid)



Finding the right words can help your family member feel heard, understood and supported.

It's not always easy to know what to say when someone you care about is struggling. The right words can open the door to a supportive conversation, while unhelpful comments, even if well meant, can make them feel worse.

You don't need to have the perfect answer. Often, simple, genuine and caring words are more powerful than you might realise.

What to say

Supportive phrases that offer understanding and care.

- **"I'm here for you."**
  A simple but powerful way to show support.
- **"That sounds really difficult."**
  Acknowledges their feelings without judgement.
- **"It's okay to feel like this."**
  Helps them feel validated and understood.
- **"Do you want to talk about it?"**
  Gives them a safe space to share if they are ready.
- **"How can I support you right now?"**
  Shows you care and want to help in a practical way.
- **"You're not alone."**
  Reminds them they have your support.

What to avoid

Comments that can be unhelpful, even if they are well meant.

- **"Just get over it."**
  Can make them feel dismissed.
- **"You need to be more positive."**
  May increase feelings of guilt or shame.
- **"Everyone feels like this sometimes."**
  Can make them feel their experience is not valid.
- **"It's all in your head."**
  Can feel invalidating and hurtful.
- **"You should try..."**
  Unwanted advice can feel like pressure.
- **"At least you have..."**
  Comparing their situation to others can make them feel worse.

Listen, believe, be patient.

The most important thing is to show you care.

Encouraging Professional Support



Reaching out for professional help can be a positive and empowering step.

It can be hard to see someone you care about struggling, and you might wonder how to suggest professional support. Many people feel anxious or unsure about seeking help, but with your encouragement they may feel more confident taking that step.

Professional support can provide specialist guidance, practical tools and a safe space to talk. It doesn't mean they are failing, and it doesn't mean you are not doing enough. It simply means they are looking after their mental health and taking steps towards feeling better.

How you can encourage them

Have an open conversation

Choose a calm time and let them know you have noticed their struggles and are concerned. Use kind and honest language.

Be supportive and reassuring

Let them know that seeking help is a positive step and that you will continue to be there for them, whatever they decide.

Offer practical help

You could help them find information, go with them to an appointment or help them explore their options.

Respect their choice

It's important to give them control. They may want to think about it or try different options before they are ready to take this step.

Types of professional support

GP support

A good first step to discuss how they are feeling and explore available options, including referrals.

Counselling or psychotherapy

A safe space to talk about their thoughts, feelings and experiences with a trained professional.

Specialist services

Depending on their needs, this might include talking therapies, mental health teams or support for specific conditions.

Helplines and online support

Useful for immediate support, trusted information or while they are waiting for appointments.

Asking for help is a sign of strength.

Your encouragement can help them take a step towards feeling better and a brighter future.

Creating a Supportive Home Environment



A calm, supportive home environment can make a real difference.

The home is where your family member can feel safe, accepted and able to be themselves. While you can't remove all of life's stresses, there are practical steps you can take to create a more positive and supportive environment.

Small changes can help reduce pressure, encourage open communication and support their mental wellbeing. It's about finding what works for your family and being flexible as their needs change.

Ways to create a supportive home environment

Create a calm space

A tidy, comfortable space can help them feel safe, relaxed and less overwhelmed.

Encourage open communication

Make time to talk, listen without judgement and respect their feelings.

Support healthy routines

Regular sleep, balanced meals, some gentle activity and time to unwind can help support their wellbeing.

Reduce unnecessary stress

Look at what might be adding pressure and see if there are any adjustments you can make.

Respect their need for space

Everyone needs time alone sometimes. Give them space when they need it, while letting them know you are there when they are ready.

Focus on the positives

Encourage the things they enjoy and help them stay connected to activities, people and places that bring them comfort.

Home should be a place of safety, acceptance and support.

A little understanding, patience and flexibility can go a long way.

Supporting Them Through Difficult Days

Patience, realistic expectations and small steps.



Everyone has good days and more difficult days.

When your family member is struggling with their mental health, some days may feel much harder than others. This can be tiring for them and for you, but your understanding, patience and steady support can make a real difference.

Recovery and improvement are rarely a straight line. There may be ups and downs, and progress often comes in small steps. What matters most is being there, showing compassion and keeping expectations realistic.

Practical ways to support them

Be patient

Progress can take time. Try to avoid putting pressure on them or expecting instant change.

Keep expectations realistic

Some days they may be able to do more, and other days less. This is a normal part of the recovery journey.

Focus on small steps

Small, achievable goals can help build confidence and a sense of progress. Celebrate the small wins.

Offer practical support

Simple everyday help, such as preparing a meal, running an errand or attending an appointment with them, can reduce stress.

Be flexible

Plans may need to change at short notice. Being flexible and understanding can help them feel supported rather than under pressure.

Encourage positive routines

Gentle structure, such as regular sleep, fresh air and activities they enjoy, can provide stability on difficult days.

Progress may be slow, but it still counts.

Your ongoing support, patience and belief can help them navigate the difficult days and move towards brighter days.

Looking After Your Own Wellbeing

You can't pour from an empty cup.



Supporting a family member can be rewarding, but it can also be emotionally demanding.

It's important to look after your own mental and physical wellbeing too. Taking care of yourself doesn't mean you care any less. It helps you to be there for your loved one in a healthy and sustainable way.

Setting boundaries, taking breaks and seeking your own support can give you the strength and resilience you need.

Ways to look after yourself

Set healthy boundaries

It's okay to say no. You can be supportive without taking on everything. Think about what you can do and what is not your responsibility.

Take regular breaks

Give yourself time to rest and do things that help you recharge. Even small moments, such as a short walk or a quiet cup of tea, can make a difference.

Seek your own support

Talk to trusted friends, other family members or a professional. It can help to share your feelings and know you are not alone.

Look after your physical health

Try to get enough sleep, eat well and keep active. Your physical health can have a big impact on your emotional resilience.

Be realistic

You can't fix everything, and progress can take time. Try to let go of unrealistic expectations and focus on what you can do right now.

Be kind to yourself

It's normal to feel a range of emotions, including worry, frustration or guilt. Acknowledge your feelings and remind yourself that you are doing your best.

Your wellbeing matters too.

By looking after yourself, you are in a stronger position to support the people you care about.

When You're Worried About Their Safety

Recognising the signs and knowing what to do.



It can be distressing to think that someone you care about might be at risk.

Most people go through difficult times without reaching a crisis point, but it's important to know the warning signs and what to do if you are worried about their safety.

Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right or they have talked about not wanting to be here, it's important to take it seriously and seek help.

Possible signs that they may be at risk

Talking about not wanting to live
They may make direct or indirect comments such as feeling life isn't worth living or that others would be better off without them.

Changes in behaviour
Withdrawing from family and friends, losing interest in things they usually enjoy or acting out of character.

Increased risk taking
Engaging in risky behaviour, increased substance use or reckless actions that seem unusual for them.

Loss of hope
Talking about feeling trapped, hopeless or that things will never get better.

What to do if you are worried

Talk to them
Ask directly and calmly if they are thinking about harming themselves. You won't put the idea in their head and it shows you care.

Stay with them
If they are in immediate distress, try to stay with them and make sure they are not alone.

Seek urgent support
Contact a GP, mental health service or a helpline for advice. If you believe they are in immediate danger, call **999**.

Take it seriously
Even if they later say they were "just joking", it is important to take all comments about self-harm or suicide seriously.

If there is an immediate risk to their safety
Call **999** if they are in immediate danger or have seriously harmed themselves.
If you are unsure, contact your GP, local mental health service or a helpline for immediate advice.

You are not alone.

If you are worried, reach out for support. Taking action can save lives and help your loved one get the support they need.

Help & Support

You are not alone.



There is support available for you and your family member. The organisations below offer trusted information, advice and support for a range of mental health needs.

If your family member is in immediate danger or has seriously harmed themselves, call **999** or go to A&E.

National support organisations

Mind
Information and support for a range of mental health needs.
www.mind.org.uk
0300 123 3393

Rethink Mental Illness
Advice and support for people affected by mental illness.
www.rethink.org
0300 5000 927

NHS Mental Health
Advice on mental health conditions, treatments and local services.
www.nhs.uk/mental-health

Samaritans
24 hour, confidential support for anyone in distress.
www.samaritans.org
116 123
(free, 24 hours a day)

CALM
Support for anyone struggling, particularly men.
www.thecalmzone.net
0800 58 58 58
(5pm–midnight)

YoungMinds
Support for children and young people's mental health.
www.youngminds.org.uk
0808 802 5544
(Mon–Fri 9.30am–4pm)

Shout
Free, confidential text support for anyone in distress.
Text SHOUT to 85258
(24 hours a day)

Papyrus
Support for young people at risk of suicide, and those who are concerned about them.
www.papyrus-uk.org
0800 068 41 41
(Mon–Fri 9am–midnight, weekends 2pm–midnight)

Other useful support

Hospice UK
Support and advice for coping with bereavement.
www.hospiceuk.org

Carers UK
Information and support for unpaid carers.
www.carersuk.org
0808 808 7777
(Mon–Fri 9am–6pm)

Relate
Support for relationships and family life.
www.relate.org.uk
0300 100 1234

MindEd
Free online learning about children and young people's mental health.
www.minded.org.uk

Help is always available.
Reaching out for support is a sign of strength, for you and your family member.

Final Thoughts

Small steps can make a big difference.



Supporting a family member with their mental health can be challenging, but it can also be a deeply meaningful and positive experience.

There is no perfect way to do it, and there will be good days and more difficult days. What matters most is your ongoing care, understanding and willingness to be there.

Look after yourself, take things at your own pace and remember that support is available for both you and your family member.

Key takeaways

You are not alone

Many people support loved ones through mental health challenges, and help is available.

Small steps matter

You don't have to have all the answers. Small, consistent actions can make a real difference.

Open communication

Being there, listening and showing understanding can help build trust and connection.

Be flexible

Needs may change over time. Try to stay patient and adaptable.

Look after yourself

Your wellbeing matters too. Set boundaries, take breaks and seek your own support when needed.

There is hope

Recovery and improvement are possible. With the right support, many people go on to live fulfilling lives.

You are making a difference.

Your support, patience and care can have a lasting and positive impact on your family member's mental health and wellbeing.