

Responding to unusual behaviour

If you have a friend or family member with a mental illness, some of their behaviour might worry you. In this factsheet, we suggest some ways to deal with unusual behaviour.

When we say 'relative' in this factsheet, we mean anyone you know who has a mental illness, even if you are not actually related.

People will have different views about what is 'unusual behaviour'. In this factsheet, it means any behaviour that you think is caused by your relative's illness.

 KEY POINTS

- Unusual behaviour in a relative is often one of the hardest aspects of mental illness for people to understand, accept and cope with.
- There are lots of reasons why people do things. Not everything your relative does is because of their illness.
- All situations and relationships are different. What works for you might not work for someone else.
- You may have to change your approach when your relative's moods change.
- It can take time for things to change. It can help to be persistent and to try to keep a positive outlook.
- You might find it helpful to keep a record of the approaches you have tried, and whether you thought they were helpful or unhelpful.
- Not all of our suggestions will work for you. At the end of this factsheet there is a template you can use to make your own guide.
- Some carer support groups will discuss these issues. You could try to find out whether there is a group near you.

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1. Behaviour and mental health

Behaviour includes the things we say, the places we go, body language, gestures and movements. Behaviour may be affected by:

- personality,
- moods and emotions,
- relationships with other people,
- culture,
- current life events,
- previous experiences,
- habits,
- physical illness,
- mental illness or other mental disorders,
- medication, drug or alcohol use, and
- other circumstances such as tiredness, pain, stress or confusion.

The reasons why we do things are complex. Nobody fully understands the reasons for all their own behaviour. For example, we all do some things without realising it.

Mental illness affects the way people behave. You may feel that your relative's illness has a huge impact on their behaviour. But there may be many other factors that are also affecting their situation. For this reason, we can only give general tips on how to help someone with unusual behaviour.

2. Unusual beliefs (delusions)

Delusions are false beliefs. For example, your relative may believe that people are trying to poison them, they are being targeted by the police or that they are on a special mission.

People often have delusions as part of 'psychosis'. You can find more about psychosis at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

Avoiding conflict

If you disagree with the beliefs or try to challenge your relative too directly, this may lead to an argument. They might even accuse you of being part of a conspiracy against them.

Remember that your relative truly believes these things, and you will not be able to talk them out of it when they are unwell. Your relative may not be able to accept logical arguments at the moment.

Things to avoid

Laughing

It may be tempting to laugh if your relative's belief is very unusual. However, try to avoid this because it could make them upset or angry.

Agreeing with the beliefs

You may feel that it is easier just to agree. However, as a general rule you should avoid this because there is a chance you could reinforce their beliefs.

Directly challenging the beliefs

It may be difficult to resist the urge to say 'that's not true!' or 'that's ridiculous'. However, this approach is likely to cause an argument. Research shows that if you confront your relative about their beliefs, they may end up believing them more.¹

Things to try

- Listening
- Acknowledging feelings
 - "This must be very frightening"
 - "How do you feel?"
- Building trust
 - "I am on your side"
 - "I want to help"
 - "Maybe if we talk about it you may feel less anxious"

Exploring evidence and offering alternative explanations

Sometimes you can try to get your relative to explore the evidence for a particular belief. This is not the same as challenging it.

"You say that man was following you but can you be sure? How many times have you seen him? Did you see where he walked to? He could have just been walking in the same direction a few times because he lives nearby"

In some cases, you could try persuading your relative to test their belief. For example, if they think their food is poisoned, you could offer to taste it for them. If they think they are being followed, you could offer to go for a walk with them.

Reassurance

- "I know you think the police are following you, but I haven't seen any evidence of this"
- You have no need to worry, you have done nothing wrong, so the police would not be interested in you"

Distraction

You may feel as though your relative spends a lot of time worrying about their beliefs. They may seem obsessed with them. The following approaches may help.

- Suggest that your relative tries voluntary work, exercise, a hobby or something else to keep their mind off things.
- Set boundaries so that you can only discuss a particular problem at certain times.
- Suggest that your relative talks to their GP about the way they feel because of the situation. Your relative might not want to speak to their GP about their beliefs, but they may be willing to talk about their feelings.

Unfortunately, not every conversation will go as well as you would like. Many carers tell us that their relative has an 'answer for everything' and that it can be exhausting trying to discuss things. If you feel this way, make sure you take regular breaks from the situation.

Delusions about you

You might find it particularly difficult to deal with a situation if your relative believes that you have harmed them in the past or will try to harm them in the future. Because of the nature of their beliefs, it is likely that they will not accept anything you say or do to prove that you care about them and want to help.

In this situation, it can help to try to keep in contact, perhaps by writing to them if things are difficult face-to-face. You could do this by email, letter or

text. It may also help if someone else who is not involved in the situation, such as a different family member or friend, can try to talk to your relative.

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3. Low motivation

When your relative is unwell, they might feel as though they have no energy or motivation to do the things they used to do. This is common, for example, in people with depression and schizophrenia. You may feel frustrated that your relative will not do things to make their situation better.

First of all, you might want to check whether your relative feels tired. This can be a common side effect of medication, and a doctor might be able to suggest some options to help with feeling tired.

How can I help someone with low motivation?

Acceptance

Accept that this may be a part of your relative's illness, at least for now, and try not to put too much pressure on them to start with.

Encouragement

If possible, include your relative in daily activities such as shopping or housework. Be careful not to put them under too much pressure to do these things. You might find that it helps just to ask them whether they would like to help. If they say no, try not to get upset, accuse them of being lazy, or ask them repeatedly on the same day. When you ask them next time, they may say 'yes'.

Organise regular activities

If your relative gets into a habit of taking part in a certain activity regularly, they may start to enjoy it over time. You could suggest activities your relative used to enjoy or you could explore new activities. This could include going for a walk, joining a group or club or doing hobbies.

Focus on the future and not the past

Your relative may have lost interest in life because they are aware of how things have changed. Reminding your relative of how they used to be may add to this feeling. Instead, talk about the opportunities available to your relative now.

Take small steps

Your relative may want their life to improve but may not feel it is possible. Work with your relative to break down goals into small steps. Progress may be slow but reassure and encourage them by noting and praising each small success made.²

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4. **Withdrawing from other people**

Your relative may feel that they do not want to see you or other people. Doctors sometimes call this 'social withdrawal'. The following may help.

- Lower your expectation to a realistic level and do not put too much pressure on them.
- If this is only a recent problem, ask your relative whether there is something bothering them. Let them know that they can come to you if they have any problems they want to talk about.
- Think about whether your relative might feel vulnerable in social situations.
- Take things slow to help rebuild their confidence. Keep the number of people to a minimum, keep conversations short and avoid issues that can become too emotional. You could try asking them to:
 - buy something from a shop,
 - order something from a cafe,
 - speak to a visitor,
 - visit family members, or
 - sit with a familiar person in a public place.
- Ask your relative where they would feel most comfortable.
- If your relative feels low, they may be willing to speak to their doctor about the situation. With the right treatment, they might start to overcome the problems they have been having.
- If appropriate, you could suggest that your relative tries going to a day centre or a support group with other people who have a mental illness.

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5. **Anger and aggression**

Most people with mental illness are no more aggressive or violent than anyone else. However, there is a small group of people who experience problems with anger and aggression.

Preventing anger and aggression

Try to work out which situations make your relative aggressive. Keeping a diary might help. You may be able to work out ways of avoiding these situations. For example, there may be certain topics of conversation you wish to avoid or it may be that your relative becomes angry if you ask them to do too much.

People are typically more aggressive if they have taken drugs or alcohol, and it is likely to be harder to reason with someone if they have taken substances.

If your relative is getting help from the NHS, try getting in touch with staff to discuss the situation.

If you live with your relative and they are being regularly aggressive towards you, you may wish to change living arrangements.

Responding to someone who is angry³

- Don't tell your relative that they are angry. Try 'you seem angry' instead.
- Listen to your relative and try to find out why they are angry. You could ask them to explain or you could summarise what you think they mean and ask them if this is correct.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself and be patient.
- Use your relative's name.
- Don't talk down to them or argue.
- Respect their feelings - don't tell them that they shouldn't be angry.
- Try not to get upset or angry yourself. Use a calm voice and keep a neutral facial expression.
- If your relative says something nasty about you, try saying 'I understand that you think XXXX, but I don't agree with that'.
- Admit if you have made a mistake.
- Ask for more time before responding, if you need it.
- Do not put your own safety at risk. If the things you have tried haven't worked, or if things are getting worse, leave the situation. If you feel that there is a serious risk of violence, call the police.

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6. Anxiety

Anxiety can be a difficult aspect of mental illness to deal with. Your relative might talk about issues that may not happen and think about the worst possible scenario. Alternatively, your relative might have an appointment or a job interview coming up that is causing them anxiety.

How to help

Keep your voice neutral

Try not to talk too fast or too loud. Speak clearly and use simple sentences. Use your relative's name if you need them to focus.

Don't tell your relative to calm down

Instead, ask them what is wrong and whether you can help. If appropriate, you could suggest that your relative takes slow, deep breaths. In some cases, it may help to sit down.

Make the situation more comfortable

If you are somewhere your relative is unfamiliar with, ask them whether they would like to go somewhere more private, more familiar or more comfortable where you can discuss the problem.

Listen

Your relative might find it helpful just to talk through their concerns, especially with someone who wants to understand and help them. There won't always be a practical way forward, and your relative won't always be able to get what they are looking for, but they may feel better after talking things through.

Anxieties about the future

If your relative is anxious about something that may happen in the future, you can try to help them to think about how likely it is and, if it is likely to happen, how they can prepare for it now. Your relative may feel a bit better about the situation if they take steps to prepare for it.

However, your relative might not always be open to discussing practical ways forward. At the moment, they may think that nothing will help them and that the situation is hopeless. If they are not in the right frame of mind to do this at the moment, you can bring it up with them again later.

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7. Risky behaviour

Mental illnesses can make people act in a risky way. This could include:

- spending too much,
- drinking and taking drugs,
- driving too fast, or
- having more sexual partners.

Ways you can help.

- Tell your relative that you are there to support them
- Talk to your relative about the possible consequences of their behaviour
- Suggest ways they could be safer

- See whether your relative would like to speak to their doctor about their mental health. They may not be worried about their risky behaviour, but there may be other things that do worry them

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8. Becoming over-dependent

If your relative find it hard to do things, you may want to help them. For example, you might help them to:

- fill in benefits forms,
- get up in the morning,
- pay their bills,
- eat properly,
- go to appointments, and
- take medication.

In the end, you may find yourself taking on more than you were expecting to. It is important for you and your relative that they do not become over-dependent on you. Your relative could lose confidence in doing things themselves and you may feel stressed and tired.

How to help

Set boundaries

Decide how much you can do for your relative and agree boundaries. It is better if you can agree this early on, but you can review the situation at any time. Explain the reasons why you need to set boundaries as sensitively as possible.

Work towards independence

Take steps to gradually build your relative's confidence and independence by agreeing goals. To start with, your relative's goals may be to make a meal from scratch, walk the dog or fill in a form. Further down the line they may be ready to live by themselves or start a job. If necessary, show them how to do the skill first and agree to practice it with them until they feel confident to do it on their own.⁴

Get a carer's assessment

If you find yourself having to do more than you want to do because your relative is particularly unwell, contact your local council's social care team to ask for a carer's assessment. They may be able to arrange additional help or a break for you and your relative.

Get help from professionals

If your relative is under the community mental health team (CMHT), you could talk to their care coordinator about how their care plan helps them

develop independent living skills. Possible options include help from an occupational therapist or supported housing.

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9. Lying

Lying is deliberately saying something that isn't true. People might lie to:

- cover up events they are ashamed of,
- improve their ego,
- get a job,
- get more money, sex, power or other social advantage,
- protect other people, or
- change the behaviour of others.

Lying and mental illness

Lying is common in the general population and people do it for all sorts of reasons. Lying is not a symptom of mental illness, and we are not aware of any research that shows whether or not it is more common for people with mental illnesses to lie. However, some people ask us about it because they think their relative tells lies.

You might find it helpful to keep a record of your relative's lying or any manipulative behaviour in case it would be helpful to a doctor in the future.

If someone has delusional beliefs because of their mental illness then they will honestly believe the things they say, even if they sound very unusual. These are not lies as such, and we give tips on how to deal with these beliefs in [section 2](#) of this factsheet.

How to help

Your relative may become defensive if you challenge them about a lie. If you do decide to challenge a lie, it can be helpful to have evidence in support of what you are saying. It is generally best to avoid saying 'you're lying' or 'that's a lie'.

If you don't have any evidence that shows that what your relative is saying isn't true, you can try questioning them. However, if you do this regularly then your relative could accuse you of not trusting them. You might find it helpful to assure them that you believe them, but that you are interested in getting more detail about the situation because you are worried.

You may feel that your relative lies to get money from you. If you are not willing to give them money, you could explain your reasons and try to help them resolve their problem by budgeting and dealing with money problems. If you are willing to give them money but you want to test a possible lie, you could ask what they need the money for. If you think that what they are saying is a lie, you could offer to buy things for them.

10. Social media, text and email

Your relative might have sent you a letter, email or text message that worries you, or might have posted something on a social media page like Facebook.

Your relative may have written something upsetting about you, or something that made you think they were going to harm themselves or others. They might have been very specific, or they might have written something vague such as 'what's the point?' which is worrying because of the way you interpret this.

These situations are difficult because:

- you won't always know where your relative is,
- you may not have enough direct contact to be able to weigh up whether they are at risk, and
- if there has been a delay in you getting the message, your relative might not still feel the same way.

Each situation will be different. However, you could think about:

- Will it help if I respond?
Think about the impact your response will have on your relative. Also, will it harm your relationship if you don't respond at all?
- If I need to respond, should I do it now or should I wait?
If the situation seems urgent, you may wish to respond as soon as you can. In other situations, you may feel that you have time to think about a response.
- How should I get in contact?
You don't have to respond directly to their message. You could ring them or visit them. If possible, you might find it easier to see your relative in person, or at least find out where they are, so that you can offer more support and try to get them help if they need it.
- Should I speak to a friend or family member?
Other people might be able to help you think of the best way forward.
- What should I say?
This always depends on your circumstances. But think about the following.
 - 'I'm sorry to hear about the way you are feeling'
 - 'Is there anything I can do to help?'
 - 'It seems as though things have been really hard for you recently'

- 'I am here if you need me'

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11. How can I get help for my relative?

If your relative's behaviour has become unusual, this is likely to be very worrying for you. Your priority to start with will probably be to try to get them medical help. We explain your options in our '**Are you worried about someone's mental health?**' and '**Getting Help in a Crisis**' factsheets, which you can download for free from www.rethink.org or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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12. What support can I get?

Supporting a person with unusual behaviour can be stressful, and you may need support yourself. You could:

- talk to friends and family,
- talk to your own doctor,
- ask for a carer's assessment from your local council,
- join a support group for carers, friends and family, and
- take some time out to concentrate on yourself.

You can find more about '**Supporting Someone with a Mental Illness**' at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

Our '**Caring and Coping**' guide also has some useful tips on how to help someone with a mental illness. You can download the guide from www.rethink.org for free.

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Behaviour Diary

Type of behaviour	What I have tried before		What I will do in the future
	What worked	What didn't work	



¹ Mueser KT, Gingerich S. Complete Family Guide to Schizophrenia. Helping Your Loved One Get the Most Out of Life. Guildford Press; 2006
Page 261

² As note 1, at pg 411

³ Queensland Health. Preventing and managing anger.
http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/behaviour/family_sup_worker/defusing_anger_fsw.pdf [Accessed November 2014]

⁴ As note 1, at pg 414 - 415

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This factsheet is available
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Phone 0300 5000 927
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

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We'd love to know if this information helped you.

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or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

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