For many of us, our first exposure to mental illness comes, with little or no warning, when a family member starts experiencing symptoms. We are ill prepared for this. All our education—about brain disorders, about psychiatric medicines, about talk therapy and other treatment options, about health providers and health insurance, about how to communicate with the ill person—happens “on the job” as we care for our loved one.

In my case, this education began after two years of marriage when my (now former) husband had the first of several episodes of mania followed by psychosis. I know firsthand how hard it is to absorb information in the middle of the trauma of seeing someone you love in distress. And how hard it is to talk about what’s happening with others when that distress involves a mental illness. I made the mistake of honoring my spouse’s request to keep the situation a secret for several years. I struggled alone with the overwhelming stress—with not knowing what to do, with a growing sense of powerlessness, and with uncertainty about our future.

I learned from my experience about things that can help family members. Acknowledge that the illness affects you and the rest of your family as well as the ill person. Seek out resources for your own support. Fight fiercely against isolation (that means sharing with others going through similar crises but also maintaining regular social activities as much as possible). Be gentle and patient with yourself and with family members in the understanding that you are all undergoing an unexpected—and unwelcomed—emotional journey. Take breaks (easy to say, hard to do). And absolutely pursue education about mental illness; new learning is a powerful antidote for feeling unprepared.

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