



Letter to Editor

The effectiveness of family caregivers as case managers for patients with severe mental illness

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 in every 8 people around the world is living with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depressive disorders accounting for a significant portion (1). The high prevalence of severe mental illnesses has far-reaching consequences for individuals and society as a whole. The costs associated with severe mental illnesses, such as hospitalization, medication, and therapy, can be devastating for individuals and their families (2).

Patients with severe mental illnesses face numerous challenges that can significantly impact their well-being. These challenges include a) inadequate access to healthcare, leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment; b)- social isolation and limited social support due to a lack of understanding and support from family and friends. This isolation can further exacerbate their mental health symptoms; c) risk of relapse, requiring ongoing care and support to prevent and manage relapses; and d) the lack of care providing services in the community and the lack of trained healthcare professionals (3).

To effectively care for patients with severe mental illnesses, it is essential to implement long-term strategies that provide support, treatment, and overall well-being (4). One of these strategies could be the case management approach. In the past few decades, applying aftercare services, in terms of a case-management system for patients with severe mental illness, has shown a significant effect on maintaining and improving patient medication adherence, reducing the recurrence

frequency, excess treatment costs, family caregivers' burden, and increasing both patients and *their families* quality of life (5). The case manager or social service assistant provides support for people with chronic illnesses or mental health problems. Case management involves assessing, planning, implementing, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating options and services to meet health needs. Communication and available resources are used to promote quality and cost-effective outcomes (6).

According to some researchers, family members can provide clinical case management services to patients with severe mental illnesses to reduce hospitalization rates and other clinical symptoms (7, 8). Transitioning from a family caregiver to a case manager requires a combination of education and skills development. By acquiring the necessary training and education, family caregivers can build upon their existing skills and apply them to a case management role. While the transition from family caregiver to case manager can be challenging, the experience and skills gained through caregiving can make for a successful and fulfilling career (7). As clinical case managers, family caregivers can assist patients with their drug treatment, help them to continue their medications, and link them to a psychiatrist to manage their problems in a more appropriate way (8).

During the post-discharge period, the family can serve as a direct care provider, recognizing early signs and symptoms of relapse and encouraging the patient to follow the

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program through trust-based communication (3). Providing a care plan for patients with severe mental illness is important when considering the costs, workforce, and feasibility of such services. Thus, it seems that employing family caregivers as case managers has three-way benefits for patients, their caregivers, and the healthcare system as a whole (9).

1) Benefits for the patients

Patients benefit the most from case management, particularly when their families are their case managers. Some of the most significant benefits are listed below.

Continuity of care

It assures mental health providers of continuity of care after discharge. Family caregivers can help patients understand the purpose of each medication, ensure they take it as directed, and monitor for any side effects or interactions (7). By assisting patients in their drug treatment, family caregivers can help prevent relapses and ensure adherence to the treatment plan. They can provide reminders, assist patients with filling prescriptions, and accompany them to the pharmacy when needed. This level of support helps patients stay on track with their medication regimen and improves their overall well-being (10).

Enhanced communication

Family caregivers often facilitate communication between patients and the healthcare team. Healthcare professionals can benefit from this valuable resource by including them as case management staff and ensuring clear and concise communication with all parties involved (7).

Reduced costs

Caregiving at home as a case manager reduces the likelihood of disease recurrence and the need for medical and care services. As a result, the patient's healthcare costs are reduced. According to evidence, other patients may experience recurrences of disease and require more medication (6); however, home caregivers, on the other hand, can play an important role in assisting patients in

recovering from illness, thus reducing the need for medicines and medical interventions (5).

Enhanced quality of care

Family caregivers, with their knowledge of the patient's unique needs and preferences, can contribute to the enhancement of quality of care. Their presence as case managers allows for a collaborative approach, where the healthcare team and family caregivers work together to provide optimal care (6).

2) Benefits for the caregivers

When healthcare providers consider utilizing family caregivers as case managers, several benefits can be reaped for caregivers and patients.

Reduced caregiver burden and burnout

The demanding nature of caregiving can lead to increased stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (11). When the family caregiver is trained and acts as a case manager, they acquire special abilities that can alleviate some of the burdens associated with caregiving (7). This redistribution of tasks can help reduce stress, improve work-life balance, and foster a more fulfilling caregiving experience (12). Additionally, family caregivers, as case managers, can even provide support and resources to other caregivers, creating a community of support (7).

Improved family caregivers' quality of life

The role of caregivers can increase stress levels and compromise quality of life (11). One way to improve the quality of life for family caregivers is by recognizing their expertise and utilizing them as case managers. By providing family caregivers with the necessary skills and training, the healthcare system can empower them to take on more responsibility and enhance their overall experience (7).

3) Benefits for the healthcare system

Case management benefits patients and their families, and the healthcare system. The following are some of the most relevant.

Reduced burnout among healthcare professionals

Integrating family caregivers as staff can help alleviate the burden on healthcare professionals. By sharing responsibilities with family members, healthcare professionals can focus more on their clinical duties, reducing burnout and improving job satisfaction (13).

Cost-effectiveness

Case management, especially with family caregivers, can lead to short hospital stays, non-adherence after discharge, and financial hardship (7). In mental health systems with low resource allocations, it seems most cost-effective and feasible to involve family caregivers in aftercare services because of the increasing number of patients suffering from mental disorders and the limited number of treatment centers that can admit them, as well as the need to reduce hospital stays and early discharges (9).

Considering the advantages of the family caregiver as a case manager, this method is especially recommended in Iran. This is very crucial for Iran's society, where there is a shortage of psychiatric beds (14). There are currently no community-based services available in Iran for providing the care of their mentally ill patients post-discharge, such as home visits or daycare centers (3, 14, 15). Leveraging the existing family caregivers reduces the need for external resources and enhances the patient's support system. The collaborative approach ensures that limited resources are allocated efficiently, resulting in personalized and effective aftercare support. It is well aligned with Iran's socioeconomic conditions, where limited resources are available. If family caregivers serve as case managers, this can benefit those suffering from severe mental illness over the long term. Their involvement ensures that patients receive holistic care, including both physical and mental support, enabling them to manage their problems more effectively (3, 14).

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