

Facts About Mental Illness

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health refers to the performance of mental function. That is, a mentally healthy person engages in productive activities, has fulfilling relationships with other people, adapts to change and copes successfully with adversity. A mental illness impairs the person's ability to do these things.

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illness is a term that refers to all mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination) that are related to distress and/or impaired functioning. Like any other health condition, mental disorders range from minor to serious and life-threatening.

Mental illness is not

- A hopeless disorder with a deteriorating course
- Caused by a character flaw
- A developmental disability (mental retardation)

From the 1999 Surgeon General's Report:

- Mental health is fundamental to health.
- Mental disorders are real health conditions.
- Mental health treatment is effective.
- A range of treatment exists for most mental disorders.

GENERAL FACTS

- People with mental illnesses are not more violent than the general society.
- With effective treatment, a supportive environment, and a sense of hope, most people with a serious mental illness live successfully in the community and have normal lives.
- Treatment success rates for many mental illnesses range between 60% and 80%, more than for diabetes or heart conditions.
- Stigma and fear prevent many people from seeking help for their mental illness.
- Widespread failures to recognize and diagnose mental illness and significant lack of access to mental health treatment create high numbers of untreated people who end up in jails or prisons, on the streets, or as victims of suicide.
- Depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia contribute to the high rates of suicide.

SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS Symptoms of mental illness include:

- Withdrawal and isolation
- Lack of usual communication or disjointed communication
- Loss of interest in self (personal hygiene, hair care, clothing, etc.)
- Loss of interest in surroundings, activities, friends
- Marked decrease in functioning
- Drastic unexplainable changes in behavior, emotions and moods
- Inappropriate laughing and responses to situations
- Apathy or unexplainable fears
- Hallucinations, delusions (irrational beliefs), paranoia, grandiosity

- Disorientation and confused thoughts
- Severe agitation or hyperactivity

If you or your child exhibit one or more of these symptoms, consider discussing the situation with a professional.

MENTAL ILLNESS TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

As with any other health condition, some illnesses are more serious than others. The various types are listed below:

SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESSES:

PSYCHOSIS or PSYCHOTIC EPISODE - A mental state in which a person cannot distinguish reality from internal perception. This state may exist at times with any of the severe mental illnesses, as well as with reactions to drugs and alcohol and some medical conditions or brain injury. Medications can control symptoms in these episodes.

SCHIZOPHRENIA - A brain disorder that affects mental processes such as thinking, sensory perception, ability to correctly identify, judge, interpret and respond to situations or stimuli. Active symptoms can include: hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, inappropriate emotional responses or reactions, communication difficulties, unjustified fears and/or drastic changes in behavior and personality. Residual or negative symptoms may include social withdrawal, apathy, inability to feel emotions and difficulty relating to others. People with schizophrenia who receive treatment are no more violent than others in our society.

MOOD DISORDERS:

CLINICAL DEPRESSION - A brain disorder characterized by a feeling of sadness for more than a few weeks and difficulty functioning in daily life. Symptoms include lack of volition, irritability, insomnia or excessive sleeping, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal thoughts. Severe forms may include psychosis. Some forms of depression are related to a traumatic life event, and symptoms go away when the stress is relieved.

BI-POLAR DISORDER - This brain disorder is also known as manic-depression. When present and untreated, an individual will experience mood swings from major depression (described above) to mania or hypo-mania mixed with periods of generally level behavior. In the hypo-manic state, excitement, euphoria, agitation, or demonstration of poor judgment is common. The more severe manic state is characterized by grandiose ideas, sleeplessness, self-destructive or dangerous behavior, extreme irritability, and paranoia and/or psychotic delusions. There are many variations in the behavior and the experience of highs and lows of bi-polar disorder. Symptoms can emerge in childhood, but more commonly in adulthood. This disorder tends to run in families.

SCHIZO-AFFECTIVE DISORDER - A brain disorder that affects both thought and mood processes. It is a combination of symptoms of both schizophrenia and bi-polar disorders.

ANXIETY DISORDERS:

These are brain disorders characterized by unexplained, non-rational fears and high levels of stress that can be disabling. Anxiety disorders often are present with other mental illnesses. Anxiety disorders can be general or specific. Examples of specific anxiety disorders include:

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD) - An individual with this disorder experiences both obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are recurrent thoughts, images and impulses that invade the mind and cause intolerable anxiety. Compulsions are actions taken by the individual to relieve the unbearable anxiety and doubt of the obsession. Left untreated, OCD can be disabling.

PANIC DISORDER - Someone who has this disorder will experience recurrent and unexpected panic attacks plus the concern that the attacks will "strike again". People feel that they are going to die, go insane or lose complete control. The intense fears may cause heart palpitations, chest pain, shortness of breath, and dizziness, but these symptoms are not physically measurable. Panic disorder can be disabling because the fear prevents people from leaving their homes.

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which physical harm occurred or was threatened. Families of victims may also develop this disorder.

SEVERE EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE (SED) - This general term refers to a number of mental illnesses found in children and adolescents. It includes the disorders named above as well as ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder), Conduct Disorder and others with varying severity of symptoms and causes. More information on children's disorders is available under INFORMATION FOR PARENTS/FOSTER PARENTS.

PREVALENCE RATES World-wide, people experience a variety of mental illnesses.

- Schizophrenia 1%
- Bipolar Disorder 1.2 %
- Panic Disorder 1.6 %
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) 2 - 3%
- Major Depression 5%

In the United States, 3.6% of the population experiences Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).