

Additional Questions and Answers...

Q: What is mental health?

Mental health has to do with how you feel about yourself, how you feel about others, and how you are able to meet and handle the demands of life. It is not the absence of problems. Rather, it describes the ability to balance problems with appropriate coping skills.

Q: What are mental illnesses?

Mental illnesses are diseases that cause mild to severe disturbances in thinking, feeling and behavior. These disturbances may significantly impair a person's ability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. Just like other medical conditions, mental illnesses vary greatly by type, symptoms and severity.

Q: What causes mental illnesses?

Many psychiatric disorders can be linked directly to a biological origin. Others may be emotional or psychological reactions to environmental or social situations. Some of these disorders may be temporary, caused by extreme stress or life changes. Treatment may include medicines, psychotherapies, and social supports.

Q: Isn't mental illness a rare disorder?

One in three Americans will experience a mental illness during their lifetime. Psychiatric problems affect people of all ages, in all income groups, in urban and rural areas and in all religions. No one is immune to mental illness.

Q: Do people ever recover from a mental illness?

Depending on the type and severity of the mental illness, a person can learn to cope, improve or experience a full recovery with proper care and treatment. As many as eight in ten people suffering from mental illness can effectively return to normal, productive lives. Anti-depressant medications help reverse the symptoms of depression in 80-90 percent of those who receive treatment. When psychotherapy is added to the treatment, these individuals can better cope with the social, emotional and vocational complications brought on by the illness. Many people suffering from schizophrenia can return to the community. Only 20% of those who take medications for schizophrenia will suffer relapse within two years of being discharged from a psychiatric hospital. **Unfortunately, only one in five people with a diagnosable mental disorder seeks treatment.**

Q: Do children get mental illnesses?

Approximately 12 million children -- infants through 18 years old -- suffer from diagnosable psychiatric disorders such as depression, attention deficit disorder, and pervasive developmental disorders. Serious depression, once thought to affect only adults, is now known to affect one in 50 children. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youngsters between the ages of 15 and 19; among this age group, 18 suicides occur daily.

Q: Aren't mentally ill people dangerous?

The vast majority of people with mental illnesses are not violent. In the cases where violence does occur, the incidence typically results from the same reasons as with the general public, such as feeling threatened or following excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs.

When many people think of mental illness, they conjure up images of a person tortured by demons only he sees and voices only he hears. It is a picture developed from movies and books that describe outmoded theories and/or portray the extraordinary symptoms of untreated illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder to make the stories more vivid. Hallucinations or delusions are symptoms of untreated mental illnesses. Not all mental illnesses have overt symptoms. In fact, many who suffer from mental illness quietly bear their pain without ever losing touch with reality or significantly drawing attention to themselves.

Q: What is clinical depression?

Clinical depression is marked by intense feelings or thoughts of sadness and despair that lasts more than a few weeks and interrupts functioning in daily life. It is one of the most treatable mental illnesses but it requires professional attention, medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of these. As with many illnesses, the earlier treatment begins, the more effective it can be. Unfortunately, largely due to the negative stigma associated with mental illness, many people feel or are told they should be able to "just get over it" and do not seek professional help.

Q: How do I get help for a mental illness?

The first step is to talk to your doctor to see if there is an underlying physical cause for the symptoms. If none is found, your doctor may refer you to a mental health specialist. Mental health professionals include psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors and social workers. Psychiatrists and other doctors may prescribe medications to treat mental illness. Most mental health providers have expertise in psychological and behavioral interventions. For some disorders, medications and psychological treatment work best together.

Q: Does my medical insurance cover treatment?

Insurance policies vary greatly, but most private insurance and health maintenance organization (HMO) plans offer some mental health benefits. Unfortunately, many plans do not provide equal treatment for physical and mental illnesses. Contact your health insurance provider for details on your coverage for treatment of mental illnesses.

Q: What are the warning signs of mental illness?

Substance abuse, "growing pains" or menopause may mask signs of mental illness. Individuals abusing drugs or alcohol may be seeking ways to cope or self-medicate mental illness. Repeated visits to a doctor with complaints of flu-like symptoms or colds may also be symptomatic of an underlying mental illness. Often the warning signs are ignored because of the stigma that persists – that the sadness is a sign of weakness and they should just "snap out of it." Confronting mental illness can be an overwhelming experience. Knowing the warning signs is very important.

Ten Warning Signs:

1. Marked personality change.
2. Inability to cope with problems and daily activities.
3. Strange or grandiose ideas.
4. Excessive fears, worries and anxieties.
5. Prolonged depression, apathy, sadness or irritability.
6. Feelings of extreme highs and lows.
7. Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits.
8. Excessive anger, hostility or violent behavior.
9. Abuse of alcohol or drugs.
10. Thinking or talking about suicide.

Parents of children/adolescents should also watch for these signs and symptoms:

1. Defiance of authority, truancy, theft and/or vandalism
2. Intense fear of weight gain
3. Prolonged negative mood, often accompanied by poor appetite or thoughts of death
4. Frequent outbursts of anger or temper tantrums
5. Persistent disobedience or aggression
6. Change in school performance and/or poor grades despite strong efforts
7. Hyperactivity
8. Persistent nightmares