



## **MENTAL ILLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH**

### **Understand the Issues. Increase Your Awareness.**

#### **What is Mental Illness?**

The term “Mental Illness” is a general description of disorders that affect the functioning of the brain. It is a “catch-all” phrase covering a wide range of symptoms and experiences as diverse as depression, anxiety, phobias, eating disorders and schizophrenia.

A person is not born with a mental illness, nor is the condition part of someone’s personality. A mental illness may have biological basis, as do physical conditions, such as diabetes. Genetic factors may contribute, as they do for heart disease. Mental illnesses can last anywhere from several weeks to a lifetime.

It does not discriminate against age, race, gender, religion, or income. In fact, mental illness is actually quite common. According to the National Institute for Mental Health, more than 54 million Americans have a mental disorder of some type in a given year. Because mental illness affects so many people, it also affects their family, neighbors and co-workers.

#### **Mental Illness is treatable and recovery is possible**

Just as many physical conditions can be treated and controlled with medication and lifestyle changes, people with mental illness can recover or control their symptoms effectively through counseling, supports and medications. The most common mental illnesses; depression, severe depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and anxiety, are treatable and controlled in most circumstances.

Research is constantly providing us with new information about the brain and the nature of

mental illnesses and, consequently, more effective treatments are available today than ever before. Unfortunately, discrimination and mistaken beliefs act as significant barriers to seeking help and remaining accepted members of the community. The stigma of mental illness prevents too many people from seeking help.

#### **The Signs of Mental Illness**

There are several early warning signs that could indicate mental illness. Although each of us may exhibit certain symptoms at one time or another, if these symptoms persist or are pronounced, one should seek professional help. Some of the most common signs are:

- Changed or abnormal behavior
- Prolonged or severe depression
- Marked personality change
- Flat or inappropriate emotions
- Confused or disordered thinking
- Undue or continuing anxiety/worry
- Tension-caused physical problems
- Withdrawal from society
- Hallucinations or delusions
- Unjustified fears
- Thoughts of suicide
- Rage or violence
- Obsessions or compulsions
- Rapid weight gain or loss
- Too much or too little sleep
- Excessive self-centeredness
- Loss of touch with reality
- Extremely immature behavior
- Negative self-image and outlook
- Inability to cope or take care of one's own personal needs



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## The Stigma of Mental Illness

Stigma towards people with mental illness has a detrimental effect on their ability to obtain services, their recovery, the type of treatment and support they receive, and their acceptance by the community. So, it's hardly surprising that a person may be anxious when first diagnosed. But it's important to remember that mental illness needn't be a life sentence; that recovery is a realistic goal and common outcome.

The Center for Mental Health Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) identifies the five (5) most damaging impacts of the stigma. Understanding these impacts is an important first step in changing public opinion regarding mental illness.

1. *Stigma discourages people from getting help.* Early and appropriate services can be the best way to prevent an illness from getting worse. Many people don't seek help because they don't want to be labeled as "mentally ill" or "crazy."
2. *Stigma keeps people from getting good jobs and advancing in the workplace.* Some employers are reluctant to hire people who have mental illnesses. Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), such discrimination is illegal. But it still happens!
3. *Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence.* Even though the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else, over 70% of mentally ill characters in prime time television drama are portrayed as violent. Such inaccurate portrayals lead people to fear those who have mental illnesses.
4. *Stigma results in prejudice and discrimination.* Many individuals try to prevent people who have mental illnesses from living in their neighborhoods.
5. *Stigma results in inadequate insurance coverage.* Many insurance plans do not

cover mental health services to the same degree as other illnesses. When mental illnesses are covered, coverage may be limited, inappropriate or inadequate.

## What can you do about stigma?

- *Accept that mental illness is real illness.* Mental illness is as real as diabetes, cancer or Alzheimer's disease. It has well known causes and a variety of treatment options. Recovery is a realistic goal and common outcome.
- *Learn about mental illness.* Learn about the symptoms and treatments. Find out where to get help in case you or someone you know needs help.
- *Stop associating blame with the illness.* Recognize that while people can take care of their physical and mental health, we cannot completely control our destiny. Like physical illness, mental illness can happen in spite of our best efforts.
- *Watch your language.* Stigma starts with labeling. How often do people use the terms "crazy," "nuts" or "a few bricks shy of a load?" Don't let labels dictate how you treat people.
- *Treat people with dignity and respect.* People with mental illness may include your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers and your family.
- *Recognize and appreciate the contributions made by people with mental illness.* Many are major contributors to the arts, medicine, the sciences and every aspect of our society.