

## What is a Mental Illness?

Mental illness is a health condition that affects thinking, mood or behavior and significantly interferes with accomplishing the tasks of daily living. Anxiety in stressful situations is a normal part of life, for example, but if the thought of leaving your house makes you so anxious that you can't go out, you have "agoraphobia." Our brain and central nervous systems run on a series of electro-chemical impulses. Many mental illnesses stem from imbalances in the brain's chemistry. Often medications can counteract these imbalances, reducing or relieving the symptoms.

Mental illness has nothing to do with one's abilities or character. It can happen to someone just as any disease can happen to someone. Mental illnesses are treatable. In fact, they are more treatable than many physical illnesses. Sadly, only about 16 percent of the more than 51 million Americans who have some form of mental illness seek help.

With the right treatment and supports, most people can and do get better. Treatment consists not only of medications, but therapy, which helps one to understand the nature of the illness and to deal with any problems it causes. Self-help groups enable others who have "been in their shoes" to help individuals along the road to recovery. Community services help people to get back on their feet and get on with their lives.

## What Causes Symptoms Can Be Hard to Pin Down

For example, clinical or "major" depression can be purely neurobiological in origin. It can be present at birth. Depression can also be caused life events, such as trauma, however. Severe trauma can change brain chemistry. Symptoms can result from learning disorders, substance abuse problems, negative self-image or brain injury instead of, or in addition to, a mental illness. Symptoms of one mental illness can resemble those of another. This is why an accurate, careful diagnosis is the key to effective treatment and recovery. Following are the major types of mental illness:

### Anxiety Disorders

When anxiety or exaggerated fears interfere with our lives, we call them anxiety disorders. More than 23 million Americans have them. They are not only the most common but the most treatable of mental health conditions.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is characterized by longstanding chronic anxiety, tension and worry with no real cause.

Panic Disorder involves sudden, unexplained bouts of extreme fear or "panic attacks."

Phobias are irrational fears of things or situations that are so extreme, the sufferer avoids the thing or situation.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder involves overwhelming, obsessive compulsions to repeatedly engage in specific, often "ritualistic" behaviors, like handwashing, doing something in a certain order or checking to see if something is in its place.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder follows a severally traumatic event. Symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, distress from and avoidance of anything that reminds one of the event, detachment, irritability and sleeping problems. Several types of effective

treatments and therapies are available for anxiety disorders. Unchecked, they can grow in severity over time.

## Eating Disorders

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are serious, potentially life-threatening illnesses. Symptoms include a preoccupation with food and an irrational fear of being overweight. Specifically, anorexia is self-starvation, while bulimia is cycles of bingeing (consuming large quantities of food) and purging (self-induced vomiting or abusing laxatives). Treatment involves a combination of medications and therapy.

## Mood Disorders

"Major" or clinical depression is the most common mood disorder. It is more than sadness or sorrow over life events, although life events can trigger it. Clinical depression is a feeling of despair, of hopelessness, worthlessness and helplessness that doesn't let up. It is a condition that can strike anyone at any age and can be life-threatening. Symptoms include sadness, social isolation/withdrawal, poor sleep patterns, appetite changes and lack of interest in or enjoyment in everyday living. Suicidal attempts or thoughts can easily result from this condition. Depressed children can "act out" and be disruptive, leading to a misdiagnosis such as conduct disorder. Bipolar Disorder (manic-depression) takes one through extreme mood swings, highs and lows. One can feel "on top of the world" for as long as three months, then come crashing down into clinical depression. Symptoms of the "manic" phase include abundant energy; sleeplessness; disorganized, racing and grandiose thoughts, unrealistic beliefs in one's abilities; rapid, pressured speech and general recklessness. There is almost always a denial that anything is wrong. Though they can be debilitating, clinical depression and bipolar disorder are very treatable with several medication options and psychotherapy.

## Schizophrenic Disorders

About one in every 100 Americans is afflicted with schizophrenia. It is a neurobiological disorder that impairs one's ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to others. Those with this illness do not have a "split personality." This is a myth. Although schizophrenia can affect anyone at any age, 75 percent of those who have it develop it between the ages of 16 and 25. Symptoms may include seeing or hearing things that aren't there (hallucinations) or having strong feelings, beliefs or perceptions not grounded in reality (delusions). Paranoia, disorientation, social disinterest and an inability to sleep or concentrate usually accompany these symptoms.

A common symptom, and problem, is a continued lack of understanding that one actually does have an illness. About 60 percent of those with schizophrenia have this "lack of insight." Several medications are available which can reduce or eliminate these symptoms. In combination with rehabilitation therapies, support and education, they are effective for the great majority who have this disease.

## Treatment Alone Is Not Enough

Successful recovery can take time and much effort. It most often comes from a partnership of the person and his family, community and supports. The love, care and encouragement that a family can provide is very often the most important factor in a person's recovery. Family support is crucial. Education is very important, both for the family and for the person in recovery. Former patients need to learn about treatment options and services, symptom management, medications and their own rights in order to start taking control of their lives again. Supports include self-help groups, peer advocacy services, case management, PACT programs, housing and vocational/educational help. As with any other type of illness, love, support and assistance are the keys to recovery.