

Mental Health Awareness

Understanding Mental Health and Common Mental Health Disorders

What is Mental Health?

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is “A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

In other words, mental health is about wellness, flourishing, and connection. And mental health *disorders* are conditions or experiences that pose significant challenges to mental health.

In this tips sheet we will look at:

- Four myths and realities about mental health
- Six common mental health disorders
- What sort of behaviors may point to mental health challenges
- How mental health disorders are usually diagnosed and treated
- Tips on when and how you should seek help

4 Common Mental Health Myths (and Realities)

Time to double-check and update your mental health knowledge. How many of these mental health myths have you believed?

Myth #1: *Only certain types of people develop mental health conditions.*

- **Reality:** Many people develop a mental condition at some point during their life, and they are caused by a complex interplay of genetic, biological, social and environmental factors. Everyone is vulnerable to mental health problems, and they affect people regardless of age, education, income or culture.

Myth #2: *Most mental health disorders are caused by personal weakness. I won't struggle with mental health if I have enough willpower, "right thinking," or "faith."*

- **Reality:** A mental health condition is not a character flaw. Willpower, optimism, and faith can all influence our mental health but cannot ever completely protect us from experiencing mental health challenges (in fact, believing these things too fervently thinking can make some mental health challenges worse!) It is dangerously simplistic to say that mental illnesses are caused by personal weakness or cured by personal strength.

Myth #3: *Mental health disorders are incurable, lifelong, and debilitating.*

- **Reality:** It is true that mental health disorders can be very debilitating. However, with the right kind of treatment, many people recover fully and have no further episodes of mental illness. For others, periods of mental illness may recur throughout their lives and/or require ongoing treatment. This is the same as many physical illnesses (such as diabetes and heart disease). Like these other long-term health conditions, mental health conditions can be managed so that individuals live life to the fullest.

Myth #4: *If I go to therapy and take care of myself better, I won't need medication to help treat my mental illness. (Or, conversely... If I take medication I won't need any counseling.)*

- **Reality:** In many cases (such as severe depression) a great deal of research suggests that a combination of therapy and medication may work more effectively to manage the symptoms of your mental health condition and improve wellbeing than either type of treatment can alone.

Six Common Mental Health Disorders

Mental health challenges can take many different forms, and there can be differences across cultures in the way that mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety are experienced and expressed. The mental health disorders described here, however, have been observed in many different countries and cultures. Here is a brief look at some of the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders:

1. **Anxiety:** Everyone feels stressed and worried at different times in life. However, these feelings usually ease once the stressful situation has passed. For some people, however, anxious thoughts and feelings aren't easily controlled. People can receive a diagnosis of "Anxiety" when anxious thoughts and feelings don't go away and/or are very intense, when they happen without any particular reason or cause, and when they make it hard to cope well with everyday life.
2. **Depression:** Everyone has days (or weeks) when they feel sad, exhausted, and flat. The difference between these sorts of "low periods" and depression lies in the *intensity* and *duration* of the symptoms. Depression causes persistent feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you typically enjoy. It is a "whole-body" experience—it impacts your body, energy level, mood, and thoughts. Depression usually affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things.
3. **Bipolar disorder:** Bipolar disorder is marked by extreme shifts in mood. Someone with bipolar disorder usually experiences periods of extremely elevated mood and high energy (mania) that are usually followed by periods of feeling extremely depressed. Some people with bipolar disorder experience these sorts of cyclical changes in mood several times a year, which others experience them only rarely.
4. **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** OCD is characterized by repetitive unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and irrational, excessive urges to do certain actions (compulsions). Although people with OCD may know their thoughts and behaviors don't make logical sense, they often feel unable to control or stop them. Common OCD obsessions include: fear of being contaminated by germs or dirt; fear of losing control and harming yourself or others; obsessions with symmetry and perfectionism; an excessive focus on religious or moral ideas. People with OCD

often try to ignore or repress these thoughts, but this can cause a great deal of tension and anxiety over time. Compulsions (or rituals) can temporarily help decrease that sense of anxiety and restore some sense of control.

5. **Schizophrenia:** Those who suffer from schizophrenia interpret reality abnormally, and schizophrenia involves a range of disruptions with thinking, behavior, and emotion. Symptoms vary, but usually involve: delusions (beliefs not based in reality); hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that don't exist); disorganized thinking and speech (e.g., answers to questions that are unrelated); abnormal movements and behavior (e.g., agitation, rigid posture). Symptoms can wax and wane.
6. **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** This is a particular set of reactions that can develop in people who have been through an event which threatened their life or safety (or that of others around them) and experienced intense feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror. Individuals with PTSD tend to experience four main types of symptoms, including: unwanted and recurrent memories, thoughts, images or nightmares of the event; being overly alert or wound-up; avoiding reminders of the event; and feeling emotionally numb.

What Sort of Behaviors May Point to Mental Health Disorders?

A wide variety of behavior can be associated with mental health disorders. Some behavior tends to be more specifically associated with some disorders than others. For example, someone suffering from PTSD may be very jumpy, reactive, and startle easily. Someone with schizophrenia may display jerky, uncoordinated movements and disorganized speech. Someone with OCD may compulsively and repeatedly perform a particular ritualized behavior such as washing their hands.

However, there are some types of behavior that can serve as a “warning sign” that something is amiss. Many of these behaviors—especially if they are transient—do not necessarily indicate that someone IS struggling with a mental health condition. However, if you observe these general behaviors in someone you love (or yourself) they should prompt you to seek out extra information and assistance.

- Disruptions to and neglect of self-care foundations (showering, eating properly, sleeping, exercising)
- Sudden changes in personality, energy levels, and routines
- Turning inwards (withdrawal from relationships, apparent exhaustion, spending more time alone or sleeping, no energy for others)
- Turning outwards (more reactive and irritable, sadness, anger, abuse)
- Lower productivity and efficiency with tasks and responsibilities (increased forgetfulness and errors, missed deadlines, neglecting responsibilities)
- Substance abuse and unhealthy self-soothing strategies (e.g., binge-watching TV, reckless decisions, risk-taking, increase use of substances such as alcohol)
- Self-harm
- Suicide attempts

How Are Mental Health Disorders Diagnosed?

To explore what may be happening, your doctor will usually recommend the following:

1. **You have a physical exam to try to rule out physical problems that could be causing your symptoms.** The doctor may ask you to take a blood test or do other lab tests to look at hormone levels and examine other issues.
2. **You discuss your thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns** with your doctor and/or a mental health professional (such as a psychologist). You may fill out a questionnaire about these things.

Sometimes it's difficult to find out which illness may be causing your symptoms, but it's worthwhile taking the time and effort to get an accurate diagnosis because this will help you understand your challenges better and determine the most effective approach to treatment.

Some Effective Treatments For Mental Health Disorders

Treatment means all the different ways in which someone with a mental illness can get help to minimize the effects of the illness and promote recovery. Early diagnosis and treatment is very beneficial and can help reduce distress, improve wellbeing, and improve outcomes over time. Someone who is suffering from mental health challenges should continue to seek support and treatment until something that helps them is found. Here is a brief look at some types of treatment for mental health disorders...

Therapy: There are different types of therapy that your doctor or mental health professional may recommend (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or psychotherapy). In general, therapy involves talking with a mental health professional about your symptoms and concerns, and discussing new ways of thinking about and managing them.

Medication: Medical research shows that many mental health disorders are associated with changes in our brain chemistry. Medications help the brain to restore its usual chemical balance, so that the symptoms are reduced or even eliminated. Some people are helped by taking medication for a while; others may need it on an ongoing basis. Your doctor should explain the benefits and possible side-effects of medication before it is prescribed.

Exercise: Exercise stimulates the release of chemicals (endorphins and serotonin) that improve your mood and stimulate the parts of the brain responsible for memory and learning. It can also improve your sleep. Regular exercise (at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise most or all days of the week) has been shown to reduce symptoms of certain mental health conditions like depression and anxiety and improve mental health.

Improvement in other self-care areas: Mental health conditions don't just affect the mind. They have physical impacts, too. A useful place to start with self-care is paying closer attention to how you feel—both physically and emotionally. Noticing symptoms early can help you practice better self-care in the moment and may prevent moments of anxiety or depression (for example) from turning into more serious or prolonged episodes. Self-care strategies that can help include:

- **Self-awareness:** Paying closer attention to how you feel—both physically and emotionally.
- **Self-compassion:** Self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or criticizing ourselves.
- **Deep breathing:** Breathing deeply and slowly can ground us emotionally and help us physically.
- **Mindfulness:** Focusing intentionally on the present.
- **Routines:** A variety of studies have shown that constructive daily routines have far-reaching mental health benefits, from alleviating bipolar disorder and preventing substance abuse to managing the symptoms of other mental disorders.

Care and support offered by others: We humans are social creatures and having people in our lives who care about us contributes to our wellbeing in very important ways. When we are struggling with mental health challenges, the temptation can be strong to withdraw from others and progressively isolate ourselves. However, supportive friends and family and colleagues who understand some of the challenges we are experiencing can help “treat” our mental health conditions in numerous ways. In addition, community groups and support programs can be especially important for people with recurrent symptoms or long-term mental health conditions. Virtual and in-person groups (e.g., facebook groups) can provide information, help with finding suitable work, training and education, psychosocial support and other benefits.

Spending time doing things that feel purposeful, meaningful, and/or fun: When we engage in work, creative, or volunteer activities that feel purposeful, meaningful, or fun, this can provide a tremendous source of positive energy and/or “lightness” that can help counteract many of the feelings that frequently come with mental health challenges – feeling heavy or weighed down, stuck, useless, or hopeless. The challenges and inertia that can come with mental health conditions can make it hard to identify and engage with these things that feel purposeful, meaningful, or fun. However, if we can, the energy they bring will help.

When To Seek Help For Mental Health Struggles

When we are struggling with mental health concerns, seeking support and additional information is always worthwhile. Reliable information and support can help you make informed choices about actions and treatments. And in general, the earlier you receive support and treatment for mental health disorders, the better.

So don’t struggle alone. **Ask for help if you’ve experienced negative changes in what’s “normal” for you for more than two weeks related to:**

- Mood, motivation, and “productivity”
- General level of stress, anxiety, tension, sadness, or worry
- What you’re thinking about
- Sleep patterns and/or nightmares
- How you feel about and react to other people
- Ability to enjoy activities and experiences
- Use of substances like alcohol

Seek help straight away if you experience

- Intrusive thoughts and/or compulsions that are distressing and/or disruptive
- Hearing voices or seeing things you're not sure are real
- Other people telling you that *they* think you may be hearing, seeing, or believing things that are not real/true (even if you think they're wrong)
- Urges or desires to self-harm
- Suicidal thoughts or urges

Places To Look For Help And Support

Contact (or ask a friend/family member to assist you to contact):

- ✓ Your Employee Assistance Program provider
- ✓ Your family doctor or another general practitioner
- ✓ Your health insurance company (ask for referrals and information about providers and resources)
- ✓ A local psychologist or counselor
- ✓ Clergy or other local faith leaders
- ✓ Any local mental health care services and/or crisis centers
- ✓ Local emergency or crisis hotlines
- ✓ Local hospitals (visit the emergency room if you are in crisis)

Where To Start Looking For More Information

Mental Health Basics: Types of Mental Illness, Diagnosis, Treatment, and More:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health#causes>

Overview of Mental Health Conditions: <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions>

Mental disorders: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>

Symptoms, Causes, Diagnosis, Treatment of Mental Health Disorders:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/symptoms-causes/syc-20374968>