

Taking Care of Your Mental Health

A person who is thinking or talking about suicide or homicide should seek help immediately.

If you or someone you know is a danger to themselves or others, please call 911. Many law enforcement agencies have officers who have been trained to respond to persons who may be experiencing a mental health related crisis.

What is Mental Health?

Mentally healthy people have a positive self-image and can relate successfully to others most of the time. They are able to handle life's everyday challenges and changes, as well as its traumas and transitions—loss of loved ones, marriage difficulties, school problems, the challenge of retirement.

Persons who are mentally healthy may experience occasional problems such as a brief depression, especially after a significant loss. However, persons experiencing mental illness do not display the characteristics of a mentally healthy person; for instance, the ability to handle the loss of a loved one. Experiencing depression on a constant and sustained basis is a sign that help is needed.

**EXERCISE CAN HELP
REDUCE STRESS**

Experts have found that exercise can help reduce stress and anxiety

(see Mayo Clinic article "Exercise eases symptoms of anxiety and depression").

Unlike the short-term difficulties people may experience occasionally in life, severe and persistent mental illnesses are diseases of the brain that have psychological, biological and sometimes situational causes. Just like physical illnesses, they range from mild to severe. Fortunately, most mental illnesses have become much better understood in the last 20 – 30 years and most can be successfully treated. Help ranges from counseling, to medication, to support groups and other types of supports.

Recognizing and Addressing Problems

Mental health issues affect people of all ages, races, cultures and economic conditions. There is nothing to be ashamed of if you are experiencing a mental illness or have a friend or family member who is ill. You are not alone. Experts estimate that one in six people in the U.S. experiences a form of mental illness.

The first step in dealing with mental illness is to acknowledge and identify the problems the person is experiencing.

Adults

A mental health professional should evaluate a person who is experiencing one or more of the following symptoms as soon as possible:

- Marked personality change.
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities.
- Strange or grandiose ideas.
- Excessive anxieties.
- Marked changes in eating or sleeping patterns.
- Extreme highs and lows.
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs.
- Excessive anger, hostility or violent behavior.
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Children

About 20 percent of children suffer from diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorders. About five to nine percent of children ages 6 – 18 suffer from a serious emotional disturbance.

The following symptoms are flags that potential serious problems may exist:

- The child seems overwhelmed and troubled by his or her feelings and is unable to cope with them.
- The child seems constantly preoccupied, worried, anxious and intense.
- The child has fears or phobias that are unreasonable or interfere with normal activities.
- The child's school performance declines and doesn't pick up again.
- The child has sleep difficulties, such as: refusing to be separated from one or both parents at bedtime, inability to sleep, sleeping too much, nightmares and night terrors. Night terrors can last between five and 20 minutes, while a person is asleep – eyes can sometimes be open. When the person wakes up, they usually have no recollection of the episode, but have a sense of fear.
- The child begins to act in a provocatively sexual manner.

Some symptoms or reactions are so serious that a pediatrician or a psychiatrist should be consulted immediately:

- The child talks about suicide. Children don't talk idly about suicide to get attention. Once they have begun to talk about it, they also may have begun to plan a way to do it.
- The child appears to be accident-prone. In younger children, a succession of accidents can become the equivalent of suicide attempts.
- The child mutilates himself or herself in some way—cutting or scarring, pulling out hair, or biting fingernails until nail beds bleed.
- The child is using alcohol or drugs.

Types of Mental Illness

There are three types of major mental illness: major depression, bipolar disorder (manic depression) and schizophrenia. A mental health professional usually can determine whether a person has one of these illnesses, or is experiencing difficulties for other reasons.

Major Depression

Major depression is characterized by a depressed mood that can range from feelings of dullness or apathy to total despair. Anxiety, crying, difficulty in concentrating, low self-esteem and thoughts of suicide may occur. Changes in body functioning also are common: sleep disturbances, eating problems, energy loss or agitation.

The most typical and obvious symptom is a loss of interest in people, events, activities and things that the person formerly enjoyed. In major depression, the symptoms interfere with, or can prevent, the person from leading his or her usual life.

Major depression can occur at any age. It has been diagnosed in all age groups, from infants to the elderly. About one in four women and one in ten men will report experiencing it during their lifetime.

Bipolar Disorder (Manic Depression)

Bipolar disorder is characterized by episodes of mania alternating with episodes of depression. During the manic episode, the individual experiences rapid, unpredictable emotional changes; he or she may be both euphoric and irritable. Energy level is high and the person can get by on very little sleep.

They may speak very rapidly as their thoughts race from one idea to another, and they are easily distracted. They may have grandiose ideas or delusions, and they often show uncharacteristically poor judgment; for example, spending money wildly or engaging in indiscreet sexual activity.

Bipolar disorder occurs with equal frequency in men and women, and it generally strikes before the age of 35. This disorder occurs less frequently than major depression, affecting about one in 100 people.

People who have depressive disorders (major depression or bipolar disorder) typically respond well to treatment. In fact, medications and psychological treatments, alone or in combination, can help 80 percent of those with these disorders. With adequate treatment, future episodes may be prevented or reduced in severity.

Schizophrenic Disorders

Schizophrenic disorders are chronic, severe and disabling brain diseases. Approximately one person out of every 100 develops a schizophrenic disorder during their lifetime – more than two million Americans experience a schizophrenic disorder in a given year. Schizophrenic disorders affect men and women with equal frequency. The disorders often appear earlier in men, usually in the late teens or early twenties. Women are generally affected in the twenties to early thirties.

Treatment, typically a combination of medication and other therapies, can relieve many symptoms of schizophrenia. An estimated one in five people recovers completely.

Where to Seek Help

Whether you are experiencing difficulty in coping with an immediate short-term emotional difficulty or experiencing symptoms of a mental illness, help is available. These are some resources available to you.

Health insurance. Most health care plans now require people to designate a primary care physician. Many initial health consultations are obtained through the primary care physician, who can make referrals to specialized care, including mental health professionals. However, some health care plans do not require members to go through their primary care physicians to get referrals to mental health care. Check with your health care provider.

Local mental health authority. These are publicly funded facilities, which serve as subcontractors for state mental health services. Find your local office and your local crisis phone number, or call 1-800-252-8154.

Sources: The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and the American Psychiatric Association.

"Taking Care of Your Mental Health" is a collaborative effort of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, and the Texas Department of State Health Services.

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