

What Are Mental Illnesses



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Mental illnesses are treatable medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are biologically-based brain disorders. Mental illnesses affect about one in four adults and one in ten children, and seriously affect about 1 in 17. Serious mental illnesses include major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and borderline personality disorder.

Mental illnesses can affect people from all walks of life, regardless of age, race, religion, political party or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing. People with mental illnesses are not inherently violent or dangerous. Most people who live with a mental illness are not violent and most people who are violent do not have a mental illness.

Mental illnesses are treatable. Most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan. However, in some cases mental illnesses can be disabling, preventing people from working and carrying out the basic activities of daily living without support. There are a number of effective treatment regimens designed to assist people with mental illnesses in their recovery. Medication, therapy (such as cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal therapy), peer support groups and other community services can all help foster recovery. The availability of transportation, a healthy diet, safe affordable housing, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, friends and meaningful work (paid or volunteer) also contribute to the overall health and wellness of people living with mental illnesses.

People with mental illnesses need access to basic mental health treatment. Some need services like case management or care coordination to help them find and maintain mental health and support services. Still others need more intensive, flexible services to help them live in their communities. The consequences of untreated mental illnesses can be staggering both for the individual living with the illness and their family and society at large. Without access to appropriate treatment, support and services people with serious mental illnesses often cycle between hospitals, jails and homelessness. Children and adolescents with unaddressed mental health needs struggle in school, are more likely to be truant or drop out and often wind up in the juvenile justice system. The economic cost of untreated mental illness is more than \$100 billion each year in the United States.

Early identification and treatment is vitally important and the treatments available today are highly effective as long as people have access to them. Between 70 and 90 percent of individuals significantly reduce their symptoms and improve their quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports. Ensuring that people with mental illnesses can access appropriate treatment and services is essential so that they can live healthy, stable and productive lives.

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