

## Mental Health

Mental health is a level of psychological well-being, or an absence of a mental disorder; it is the psychological state of someone who is functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment. Mental health is not a state of blissful happiness twenty-four hours a day seven days a week; nobody has a life like that. Each of us at times feels sad, happy, anxious, afraid, etc., being able to cope with these feelings, while handling the ordinary demands of life; this is what mental health is.

When we are mentally healthy, we maintain the ability to adapt and problem solve, our minds are flexible. A mentally healthy person can cope with change and deal with adversity and handle stress, they can deal with difficult situations when they arise. Say for instance you are late for work and your car won't start; a mentally well person will think to maybe call a cab, or a friend, ride a bike, or maybe just stay home. They will be able to maintain their flexibility and problem solve. When someone is not mentally well they lose that flexibility and instead rely on the same problem solving strategies, or they may just run away from their problems all together.

Mental illness is a general term used to describe a number of significant changes that can happen to our minds; they can range from mild to severe. A person may have difficulty with concentration. Imagine relaxing on couch reading a newspaper, when you reach the third paragraph and realize you don't know what the article is about. People with mental illness can have significant difficulty with memory, attending, and concentrating. This can affect important areas of a person's life. A student with attention concentration problems may have trouble reading material from lectures or texts and could be frightened or intimidated.

Mental illness can also affect our mood, they can make us more anxious, more sad, more irritable; they can create a variety of unpleasant changes. A mental illness may also cause a loss of the sense of pleasure. Most of us partake in activities that we enjoy doing; sports, artistic endeavors, listening to music, being outdoors, or just associating with friends. People with mental illness often lose the sense of pleasure that accompanies these activities. Imagine living in a world where there was nothing that could make you feel good.

People with mental illness often undergo serious behavioral and physical changes. Their sleep and eating patterns may be disrupted, and they may lose interest in personal hygiene. Often those with serious mental illness stop taking care of themselves. A person with untreated schizophrenia will die on average 25 years younger than his healthy counterpart. This has nothing to do with mental illness; it has to do with their physical healthcare. They are 4/6 times more likely to develop diabetes and 5/7 times more likely to develop pulmonary problems like pneumonia.

The World Health Organization has said depression is the leading cause of disability in developed countries, ahead of heart disease, stroke, traffic accidents, etc. The #5 cause of disability in the developed countries is addiction, which is ubiquitous with mental health. These things cost society a great deal. The average cost to society for treating someone with major depression is roughly equal to the cost of caring for someone with blindness or paraplegia. The cost of active psychosis is roughly equal

to quadriplegia. While the costs of mental illness are high, it is still not a topic which is openly discussed in mainstream society.

There is a strong stigma associated with mental illness and addiction. We tend to believe that some illnesses are better than others, and the people that have them are better than others too. Many times it has something to do with our ability to empathize and recognize others' emotions from our own. We have all had various experiences in life which have not been pleasant, so when we hear someone talking about major depression we think "oh, I've had a bad day, how bad can it be?" When in reality there is no way we can actually know what it feels like to be clinically depressed, unless we have been there.

The stigma associated with mental illness causes many to avoid seeking treatment or try to self-medicate. This is why mental illness and drug addiction are ubiquitous; where you find one you often find the other. The term *comorbidity* describes when two disorders or illnesses occur simultaneously in the same person. Research has shown that drug abuse and other mental illnesses are often comorbid. There is evidence showing mental illness can lead to drug abuse, drug abuse can lead to mental illness, and drug abuse and mental illness are both caused by other common risk factors. In reality, all three scenarios can contribute, in varying degrees, to the establishment of specific comorbid mental disorders and addiction.

A big problem with mental illness is the large discrepancy between quality of care for physical health vs. quality of care for mental health. Whereas in developed countries most people have access to quality physical healthcare (though they may have problems *paying* for it), even in the best resource countries there still remains a huge life expectancy gap between those with mental illness and those without. One of the causes for this is that many people avoid seeing mental health professionals, and instead go to 'regular' doctors. 50% of all mental healthcare in the United States is delivered by primary care physicians, and they prescribe more psychotropic drugs than psychiatrists as well. Often a patient will come in 'knowing what they want' after looking something up on the internet or after seeing a direct to consumer marketing advertisement by a pharmaceutical company. Many doctors just give their patients what they want instead of writing a referral that will not be followed through with.

In addition to the general decline in health experienced by those with mental illness, there is also the issue of suicide. No matter the race or age of the person; how rich or poor they are, it is true that most people who die by suicide have a mental illness. When those with mental illness become unable to cope with and adjust to the problems in their lives, they take it by their own hand. Suicide is on the top of the list for leading causes of death for young people, in developed and undeveloped countries all over the world. The most common underlying disorder for those who commit suicide is depression, 30% to 70% of suicide victims suffer from major depression or bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder.

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder, defined by manic or hypomanic episodes. The mood episodes associated with it involve clinical depression or mania (extreme elation and high energy) with periods of normal mood and energy in between episodes. The severity of mood episodes can range from very mild to extreme, and they can happen gradually or suddenly within a timeframe of days to weeks. When these mood episodes happen four or more times per year, the process is called rapid cycling. Bipolar

disorder is a serious condition; mania can cause sleeplessness, sometimes for days, along with hallucinations, psychosis, grandiose delusions, or paranoid rage. In addition, depressive episodes can be more devastating and harder to treat than for people who never have manias or hypomanias, hence the increased rate of suicide.

Another serious mental disorder is schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is characterized by abnormal social behavior and failure to distinguish what is real from what is not. Common symptoms include false beliefs, auditory hallucinations, confused or unclear thinking, inactivity, and reduced social engagement and emotional expression. The disorder is thought to mainly affect the ability to think, but people with schizophrenia are likely to have additional conditions, including major depression and anxiety disorders; the lifetime occurrence of substance abuse is almost 50%. Social problems, such as long-term unemployment, poverty, and homelessness are common.

Mental health problems are associated with distress, that is to say people are not happy when mentally ill. Also associated with mental disorders is impaired function, that is the mentally ill are not able to do the things they were able to when they are well. It is not easy to live with mental illness, and it is impossible to know what it is like unless you have been there.

Mentally ill people are often the victims of an indifferent justice system, which finds it much easier to lock people away than to actually provide mental health services. A recent study by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) showed that 64 percent of local jail inmates, 56 percent of state prisoners and 45 percent of federal prisoners have symptoms of serious mental illnesses. The mental healthcare system is a failure in the United States, it is commonplace to hear on the news about a new mass murder that has been committed by someone with serious mental health issues.

There are many ways we can work to maintain our mental health. We can engage in productive activities, such as studying music, writing something, reading a book, teaching someone something, being a student; all of these are productive activities that engage the senses and intellect to help grow and develop. Eating healthy and exercising regularly are also very important to maintaining mental health, if your body is not functioning well your mind cannot either. Cardiovascular exercise is also important for maintaining good blood flow to the brain. It is also important to engage in fulfilling relationships; relationships which make us stronger, happier, more loving people, relationships that enrich our lives.

Mental illness can be managed. Studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy is superior to medication alone. It is better to sit down and talk with a professional than to simply take a pill and hope things get better. These are chronic diseases that must be dealt with as such. There may be no cure but you can live a full and successful life by taking care of your self and taking responsibility for your own healthcare. Those who cannot seek help for themselves must receive the help they desperately need. People must stop judging those with mental health issues, and begin to believe these are illnesses, nothing more and nothing less.