

Mental Illness: Frequently Asked Questions

What is mental illness?

Many theories including biological (genetics), psychological, social, environmental, and spiritual distress. Some cases occur during or after experiencing a certain degree of stress or several stressors in a short period of time when our normal defenses are overwhelmed. Stressors can be physical, emotional, spiritual, etc. How resilient a person is also effects whether or not a person becomes ill. Signs and symptoms may also be due to other medical illnesses or side effects of medication. In children and adolescents signs and symptoms may be due to anxiety or bullying.

Just because someone has a family history of mental illness does not mean that they will start having symptoms. It takes more than just the genetic risk/family history. According to stress-diathesis model, a triggering stressor or event is needed for the genetic predisposition to show symptoms to appear in an individual. Someone may have the genetic possibility, but never have symptoms or signs and, therefore, not have mental illness. However, they could pass the risk along to their offspring.

The terms used can be confusing. Mental illnesses may also be called psychiatric disorders, mental health problems or behavioral health problems. It depends on what terms the person experiencing symptoms is comfortable with.

What is mental health?

May be described as a sense of balance and harmony. The ability to cope with life's stressors, adapt to changes, problem-solve, make good judgments; develop good relationships, have a sense of purpose, and be a productive member of society.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 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*.” (Vallas, 2015, 1)

What about alcohol or substance abuse?

Currently problems with alcohol use/abuse/dependence are included as mental illnesses. In the past they were seen and treated separately. Some people have both a substance abuse problem and another mental illness such as major depression or bipolar disorder- “dual diagnosis”. Sometimes the alcohol/substance use/abuse/dependence occurs first and the signs and symptoms of other mental illness occur later. At other times other mental illnesses occur and people try to “self-medicate” by using/abusing/depending on alcohol or drug and end up with an alcohol or drug problem. In all these situations, both illnesses need treatment.

How would I know if my family member, friend, or even myself, has mental illness?

There is a wide range of “normal” human experiences and responses. When it comes to mental illness, there are specific signs and symptoms occurring in time frames and important areas of a person’s life that are directly affected. All of these things together lead to a diagnosis. Please also see information posted regarding a specific illness.

How is mental illness treated?

Usually a combination of medications and counseling/therapy. Holistic treatment may also include exercise, nutrition, spiritual resources, emotional support, education, stable environment, support groups, learning coping skills, better problem-solving strategies and even financial assistance. Sometimes, depending on the reasons for seeking/needing help, counseling and taking care of one’s physical health to improve their ability to cope are the main treatments needed. A person’s symptoms may be due to responding to a difficult or less than satisfactory living situation. The length and type of treatment is very individual depending on both the person and their doctor and treatment team. A treatment team may include doctors (psychiatrists and other medical physicians), therapists (psychologists, social workers, substance abuse/chemical dependency counselors, occupational therapy, and physical therapy), nurses, nutrition specialists, and spiritual advisors such as the hospital chaplain or the person’s own minister or priest. There are inpatient and outpatient/community treatment teams. It is hoped that advances in genetic research will make treatment more specific to each person and as a result be more successful.

Is mental illness curable?

Although mental illness is not “curable” in the way we think of an infection being cured, it can be managed is much like other chronic illnesses such as diabetes mellitus or high blood pressure. It is very important to take medication regularly, continue with therapy, and work closely with all healthcare providers. As with other chronic illnesses, there may be periods where symptoms worsen (ex. Relapse) and then improve. Keeping up with treatment on a regular basis helps decrease the possibility of relapse and can shorten the time period of a relapse. This will also help the person live as normal a life as possible.

What if someone refuses treatment? Can someone still get help for them?

A person can chose to accept treatment and voluntarily sign themselves into a hospital or outpatient program. However, if they do not see the need for treatment, there are a few specific circumstances that allow a person to be admitted (committed) for a few days to be evaluated to see if they do need treatment. These require someone (petitioner) who has witnessed behavior or heard the person make statements about hurting themselves or both. These circumstances include: a) being considered a danger to themselves, b) a danger to others, or c) inability to care for self (ex. Can cause danger to the person medically).

Can someone get treatment even if they do not have health insurance or any other way to pay for treatment?

Yes. If a person has medical health insurance, equal “parity” or coverage for mental illnesses has been included by law. If someone has no health insurance and can’t afford to pay, they may be eligible for Medicaid/Medical Assistance. They will need to ask for the help of a social worker or they can directly contact the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare online or by telephone. Some hospitals and community outpatient programs have other payment arrangements (ex. Sliding fee schedule), but the person needs to ask to talk to a social worker or someone in the business office regarding these. For help paying for medications, many of the companies that make specific medications (ex. Lilly) have patient assistance programs. Many times they have financial requirements and vary so it is best as a social worker or contact each company separately. There also are various prescription discount cards available and can be found online. See information in “Resources” section.

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Pace Program: Mental Health

<http://www.dhs.state.pa.us/provider/healthcaremedicalassistance/specialpharmaceuticalbenefitsprogram/spbpquestionsandanswers/index.htm>