



Mental illnesses are very common. They are also widely misunderstood. People with mental illnesses are frequently stigmatized by others who think it's an uncommon condition. The truth is, mental illness can happen to anybody.

Most people believe that mental disorders are rare and "happen to someone else." In fact, mental disorders are common and widespread. Most families are not prepared to cope with learning their loved one has a mental illness. It can be physically and emotionally trying, and can make us feel vulnerable to the opinions and judgments of others.

If you think you or someone you know may have a mental or emotional problem, it is important to remember there is **hope and help**.

What is mental illness? A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal.

Mental health problems may be related to excessive stress due to a particular situation or series of events. As with cancer, diabetes and heart disease, mental illnesses are often physical as well as emotional and psychological. Mental illnesses may be caused by a reaction to environmental stresses, genetic factors, biochemical imbalances, or a combination of these. With proper care and treatment many individuals learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional disorder.

Mental health problems can seriously impair academic performance and can lead to confused or disturbed behaviour. Minor problems which interfere with a student's capacity to work result in distress, wasted effort and undermine academic progress. A more seriously disturbed student, as well as needing appropriate professional support, may cause anxiety and concern to fellow students, tutors and college staff. The suicide or attempted suicide of a student is an extreme (but fortunately very rare) response to mental distress and a very disturbing event for all, especially for those close to the individual concerned.

Do You Find Yourself?

- *Denying the warning signs?* Substance abuse, "growing pains" or menopause, for example, may mask signs of mental illness. Individuals abusing drugs may be seeking ways to cope with their mental illness. Repeated visits to a doctor with complaints of flu-like symptoms, back pain, or colds may also be symptomatic of an underlying mental illness.
- *Worrying about what other people will think?* Often the warning signs of mental illnesses are ignored because of the stigma that persists. Some people may face ridicule or hostility from friends and neighbors. The insensitivity of others may add to feelings of loneliness and isolation and may stop a family from seeking help.
- *Wondering who's to blame?* Often, knowing what causes an illness helps people to accept the situation and move on to seeking treatment. With some mental illnesses, there are no immediate answers or obvious reasons why someone became ill.

Today, research tells us that many mental illnesses are caused by a variety of reasons. Find out all you can about your loved one's illness by reading and talking with mental health professionals.

How does stress affect mental illness? Going through a stressful event doesn't necessarily mean that you'll develop a mental illness, such as depression or an anxiety disorder. But it can increase your risk of developing a mental illness. Stress runs the gamut, from daily hassles, such as traffic jams and financial worries, to major life events, such as the breakup of a relationship or the death of a loved one. People who have experienced depression in the past are more vulnerable to depression after a major loss. People with an active, problem-solving style are less likely to experience mental illness such as depression than are those with a passive, emotion-focused style.

Evaluating your mental health: In evaluating your mental health, all four of these approaches — your own perceptions, others' perceptions, cultural and ethnic norms, and statistical values — are typically taken into consideration. Mental health experts may ask how you feel, whether others have noticed a difference in your behavior or mood, and what your cultural background is. They also may ask you to fill out psychological questionnaires.

Other factors also are considered. Among them:

- How long you've had symptoms
- How severe your symptoms are
- How upsetting the symptoms are to you
- How the symptoms disrupt your life

It's normal to feel sad after a valued relationship ends. But if you feel intensely sad and upset for several weeks and you lose interest in daily activities, you may have depression. Similarly, if you get anxious before a presentation to a big client but manage the signs and symptoms, such as sweating or rapid breathing, you may just have a case of normal stage fright, and not social anxiety disorder. And if you cut someone off in traffic or yell at a store clerk, you may just be having a bad day or be a generally ornery person. But if you're abusive, violent, manipulative, exploitive and disregard the law, you may have antisocial personality disorder, sometimes known as sociopathy.

How to cope day-to-day

Accept your feelings: Despite the different symptoms and types of mental illnesses, many families who have a loved one with mental illness, share similar experiences. You may find yourself denying the warning signs, worrying what other people will think because of the stigma, or wondering what caused your loved one to become ill. Accept that these feelings are normal and common among families going through similar situations. Find out all you can about your loved one's illness by reading and talking with mental health professionals. Share what you have learned with others.

Handling unusual behavior: The outward signs of a mental illness are often behavioral. Individuals may be extremely quiet or withdrawn. Conversely, he or she may burst into tears or have outbursts of anger. Even after treatment has started, individuals with a mental illness can exhibit anti-social behaviors. When in public, these behaviors can be disruptive and difficult to accept.

The next time you and your family member visit your doctor or mental health professional, discuss these behaviors and develop a strategy for coping.

Establishing a support network: Whenever possible, seek support from friends and family members. If you feel you cannot discuss your situation with friends or other family members, find a self-help or support group. These groups provide an opportunity for you to talk to other people who are experiencing the same type of problems. They can listen and offer valuable advice.

Seeking counseling: Therapy can be beneficial for both the individual with mental illness and other family members. A mental health professional can suggest ways to cope and better understand your loved one's illness.

When looking for a therapist, be patient and talk to a few professionals so you can choose the person that is right for you and your family. It may take time until you are comfortable, but in the long run you will be glad you sought help.

Taking time out: It is common for the person with the mental illness to become the focus of family life. When this happens, other members of the family may feel ignored or resentful. Some may find it difficult to pursue their own interests.

If you are the caregiver, *you* need some time for yourself. Schedule time away *to prevent* becoming frustrated or angry. If you schedule time for yourself it will help you to keep things in perspective and you may have more patience and compassion for coping or helping your loved one. Only when you are physically and emotionally healthy can you help others.

"Many families who have a loved one with mental illness share similar experiences"

It is important to remember that there is hope for recovery and that with treatment many people with mental illness return to a productive and fulfilling life.

Warning Signs of Mental Illness: The following information is designed for educational purposes only and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Specific questions about personal medical or mental health problems should be discussed with your healthcare provider.

Signs of Depression in Adults: Change in appetite, such as eating noticeably more or less than usual. Weight gain or loss; Noticeable change in sleeping patterns, such as early morning awakening, inability to sleep or sleeping more than usual, Speaking and/or moving with unusual slowness, Loss of interest or

pleasure in activities formerly enjoyed, Withdrawal from family and friends, Fatigue or loss of energy, Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or inappropriate guilt, Diminished ability to think or concentrate, slowed thinking or indecisiveness, Thoughts of death or suicide, Depressed mood.

Symptoms of Manic Depression (Bipolar Disorder): Lasting period of an overly happy mood which is abnormal, unusual or lasting, Unusual irritability, Overblown self esteem or grandiosity, Decreased need for sleep, More talkative (talks excessively, impulsive speech and behavior), Thoughts going too fast, Easily distracted and agitated, Increase in number and speed of physical activity, Takes unusual risks (sexual and/or social), Feeling of depression following a period of mania.

Signs of Suicide: Talking about committing suicide; Trouble eating or sleeping, Drastic changes in behavior, Withdrawal from friends or social activities, Loss of interest in hobbies, work or school, Preparation for death by making out a will and final arrangements, Giving away prized possessions, Prior suicide attempts, Taking unnecessary risks, Preoccupation with death and dying, Loss of interest in personal appearance, Increased use of drugs.

Signs of Anxiety: Uncontrolled, excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events or activities, Feelings of restlessness, fatigue, tension; Poor concentration and disturbed sleep.

Signs of Panic Disorder: A discrete period of intense fear with at least four of the following symptoms: Pounding, increased heart rate; Sweating; Trembling or shaking, Feeling short of breath or smothering, Feeling of choking, Chest pain or discomfort, Nausea or abdominal distress, Feeling dizzy, lightheaded, or faint, Feeling of unreality, Fear of losing control or going crazy, Fear of dying, Tingling and numbness in hands or feet, Hot flashes or chills.

Signs of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Obsessions: thoughts, impulses or images that become intrusive, inappropriate, and cause anxiety or distress. These thoughts, impulses or images are not simply excessive worries about real-life problems. Compulsions: repetitive behavior (e.g., hand washing, checking, arranging, etc.) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating silent words) that the person feels driven to perform and that cause anxiety or distress if not done.

Symptoms of Psychosis: Poor insight, Decreased ability to carry out activities of daily living, e.g., becoming more unkempt and disorganized, Delusions: firmly held false beliefs about the external reality, Hallucinations: hearing things or conversations that are not there and/or seeing things that are not there; Paranoia; Disorganized speech; Unusual and poorly goal-directed behavior. Symptoms of mental disorders vary depending on the type and severity of the condition. Some general symptoms that may suggest a mental disorder include: Confused thinking; Long-lasting sadness or irritability; Extreme highs and lows in mood, Excessive fear, worrying or anxiety, Social withdrawal, Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits, Strong feelings of anger, Delusions or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not really there); Increasing inability to cope with daily problems and activities, Thoughts of suicide, Denial of obvious problems, Many unexplained physical problems, Abuse of drugs.

Don't label people with words like "crazy," "psycho," or "charya" or define them by their diagnosis. Instead of saying someone is "a schizophrenic," say he or she "has schizophrenia." Don't say "a schizophrenic person," say "a person with schizophrenia." This is called "people-first" language, and it's important to make a distinction between the person and the illness.

- Learn the facts about mental health and share them with others, especially if you hear something that isn't true.
- Treat people with mental illnesses with respect and dignity, just as you would anybody else.
- Respect the rights of people with mental illnesses and don't discriminate against them when it comes to housing, employment, or education. Like other people with disabilities, people with mental health problems are protected under human rights.

Many people are hesitant to get treatment for mental illness. How can they take that first step? People may be hesitant to seek treatment for a number of reasons. They may think that their depression, for instance, will go away on its own. Or they may consider it a sign of weakness. In addition, some people fear the stigma that's sometimes attached to mental illness. But it's important to understand that biological factors play a major role in the development of mental illness, just as they do with other medical disorders. Effective treatment is available that can eliminate or minimize symptoms, improve a person's ability to function and ultimately improve the quality of their life.

In case of psychological crisis: you may contact the Department of Psychology, University of Karachi in person or contact at 0321-891273. 9261300 -7 Ext: 2283. Fax # 021-9261331; Chairman, Deptt. of Psychology: harizvi@uok.edu.pk