

Mental Health Awareness

Everyone feels worried, anxious or down from time to time but relatively few people develop a mental illness. Mental illness is a mental health condition that gets in the way of thinking, relating to others, and day-to-day function.

Dozens of mental illnesses have been identified and defined. They include depression, generalized anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, and many more.

Mental illness is an equal opportunity issue. It affects young and old, male and female, and individuals of every race, ethnic background, education level, and income level. The good news is that it can often be treated.

Signs and symptoms of mental illness depend in part on the illness. Common symptoms include:

- feeling down for a while
- extreme swings in mood
- withdrawing from family, friends, or activities
- low energy or problems sleeping
- often feeling angry, hostile, or violent
- feeling paranoid, hearing voices, or having hallucinations
- Often thinking about death or suicide.

In some people, symptoms of a mental illness first appear as physical problems such as stomachaches, back pain, or insomnia.

Individuals with a mental illness can often ease their symptoms and feel better by talking with a therapist and following a treatment plan that may or may not include medication.

Mental illnesses affects 19% of the adult population, 46% of teenagers and 13% of children each year. People struggling with their mental health may be in your family, live next door, teach your children, work in the next cubicle or sit in the same church pew.

However, only half of those affected receive treatment, often because of the stigma attached to mental health. Untreated, mental illness can contribute to higher medical expenses, poorer performance at school and work, fewer employment opportunities and increased risk of suicide.

Mental health awareness has been steadily growing around the world, but it is still largely below what it should and could be. Often, getting treated for a mental illness is something looked at as “embarrassing” and people rarely want other to know it’s happening. Looking away from the issue does not make the issue disappear-if anything, it gets worse.

With increased mental health awareness comes more support and care for those that need it. Currently, the public’s opinion on mental issues has a negative impact on those dealing with them, but the public has the power to make a positive impact. When people are educated on mental illness, their effects and how often they occur, it lessens the bad rep they have. Mental health is just as important as physical health, in some aspects it is more important because you can you cannot keep your physical health without a healthy mental capacity.

Factors that Affect Mental Health:

- Self-esteem. This is the value we place on ourselves, our positive self-image and sense of self-worth
- Feeling loved
- Confidence
- Family breakup or loss
- Difficult behavior
- Physical ill health
- Abuse.

The following are ways you can create mental health awareness:

- Host a mental health screening event
- Talk about it
- Share your story
- Encourage non-judgmental speak
- Read about it
- Talk to loved ones about how they are feeling
- Talk about mental health with your children.

Tips for talking about mental health

1. Set time aside with no distractions

It is important to provide an open and non-judgmental space with no distractions.

2. Let them share as much or as little as they want to

Let them lead the discussion at their own pace. Don't put pressure on them to tell you anything they aren't ready to talk about. Talking can take a lot of trust and courage. You might be the first person they have been able to talk to about this.

3. Don't try to diagnose or second-guess their feelings

You probably aren't a medical expert and, while you may be happy to talk and offer support, you aren't a trained counsellor. Try not to make assumptions about what is wrong or jump in too quickly with your own diagnosis or solutions.

4. Keep questions open-ended

Say "Why don't you tell me how you are feeling?" rather than "I can see you are feeling very low". Try to keep your language neutral. Give the person time to answer and try not to grill them with too many questions.

5. Talk about wellbeing

Exercise, having a healthy diet and taking a break can help protect mental health and sustain wellbeing. Talk about ways of de-stressing and ask if they find anything helpful.

6. Listen carefully to what they tell you

Repeat what they have said back to them to ensure you have understood it. You don't have to agree with what they are saying, but by showing you understand how they feel, you are letting them know you respect their feelings.

7. Offer them help in seeking professional support and provide information on ways to do this

You might want to offer to go the GP with them, or help them talk to a friend or family member. Try not to take control and allow them to make decisions.

8. Know your limits

Ask for help if the problem is serious. If you believe they are in immediate danger or they have injuries that need medical attention, you need to take action to make sure they are safe.

Sometimes it will seem obvious when someone is going through a hard time, but there is no simple way of knowing if they have a mental health problem. Sometimes you don't need to know. It is more important to respond sensitively to someone who seems troubled than to find out whether or not they have a diagnosis.

If you are worried about someone, it can be difficult to know what to do. When you are aware there is an issue, it is important not to wait. Waiting and hoping they will come to you for help might lose valuable time getting them support. Talking to the person is often the first step to take when you know they are going through a hard time. This way you can find out what is troubling them and what you can do to help.

If it's a family member or close friend you are concerned about they may not want to talk to you. Try not to take this personally, talking to someone you love can be difficult as they may worry that they are hurting you. A person who suffers from a mental illness do not see things the same way as a person who does not. It is important to be honest, tell them you care and be present.