LET'S TALK FACTS ABOUT

What Is Mental Illness?

MENTAL ILLNESS, AND IMPACTS ON SOCIETY
CAUSES OF MENTAL ILLNESS
ARE MENTALLY ILL PERSONS VIOLENT?
PSYCHIATRISTS AND THEIR PATIENTS

In the past, the subject of mental illness was surrounded with mystery and fear. Today, we have made tremendous progress in our understanding and, especially, in our ability to offer effective treatments. However, questions about mental illness often go unanswered and stand in the way of people receiving help.

How Common Is Mental Illness, and What Are the Impacts on Society?

Mental illness is common, and the milder conditions are very common. One fifth of Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder during any given year. One fifth of school-age children are also affected by these conditions. Severe and persistent mental illness is less common, but still afflicts 3 percent of the population.

The vast majority of individuals with mental disorders continue to function in their daily lives, although with varying impairments. Overall medical care costs are driven up enormously by costs associated with unrecognized psychiatric syndromes.

What Are the Causes of Mental Illness?

The exact causes of mental disorders are unknown, but an explosive growth of research has brought us closer to the answers. We can say that certain inherited dispositions interact with triggering environmental factors. Poverty and stress are well-known to be bad for your health—this is true for mental health as for physical health. In fact, the distinction between "mental" illness and "physical" illness can be misleading. Like physical illnesses, mental disorders can have a biological nature. Many physical illnesses can also have a strong emotional component.

Are Mentally Ill Persons Violent?

There is a misconception that mentally ill persons are violent, which contributes to the stigma of mental illness. The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent, and the majority of violent acts are conducted by persons who are not mentally ill. Mentally ill persons are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators, and more likely to hurt themselves than hurt other people.

Do Psychiatrists Do More than Just Write Prescriptions for their Patients?

State of the art treatment for mental illness is very effective—as effective as treatments for high blood pressure, cancer, and arthritis. But good treatment for mental illness (like treatment for ulcers or heart disease) takes a comprehensive approach. Medication is often not the only treatment for a chronic illness, although excellent new psychiatric medications have been developed in recent years.

Psychiatric treatment involves a full mental and physical health evaluation and an individualized treatment plan, which may include psychotherapy (talk therapy), medication, or other modalities. Psychiatrists help patients understand illnesses and understand what they can do to resolve life problems that contribute to illnesses. This may involve issues on the job, in school, or within the family and community.

Psychiatrists see the necessity of working within a tailored approach for the treatment of their patients, often taking a hands-on approach to the whole fabric of the patient's needs. Educational, medical, spiritual, and interpersonal as well as basic issues such as adequate housing and nutrition are considered. Sometimes the misuse of drugs or alcohol is present and will require treatment.

Today's model of psychiatric care recognizes the importance of families as part of the treatment team. Enlightened interventions which help families struggling with child abuse and neglect, domestic and community violence, substance abuse, or school failure increasingly integrate psychiatric consultation into their programs. Any or all of these interventions may be used in tailoring a treatment plan for patients.

How Difficult Is It to Get an Appointment with a Psychiatrist?

It is always wise to begin a search for help by asking the family doctor for advice; in addition, local hospitals often can make a referral and teaching hospitals or large medical centers are especially likely to be aware of available resources. A variety of reputable organizations have lists of service providers, and good low-cost or sliding-scale treatment programs exist in many communities.

Many of the problems Americans face in obtaining good mental health services are similar to the problems in obtaining general medical services. Moreover, 40 million Americans have no insurance at all. Advocacy organizations, professional societies, patients' rights groups, and the public at large have been taking action to make treatment for mental illness more accessible and affordable.

Resources

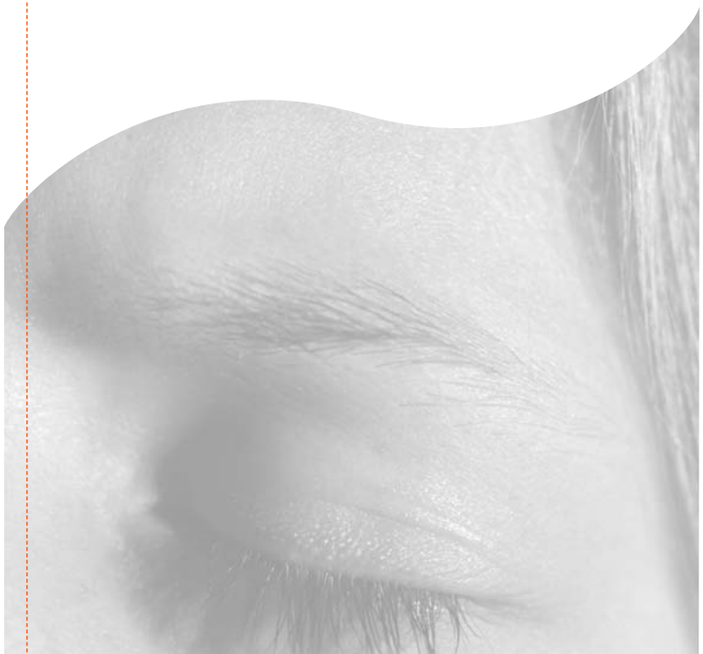
For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)
1000 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)
3615 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.,
Washington, DC 20016-3007
202-966-7300
www.aacap.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd.,
Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
703-524-7600
Information Helpline:
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)
www.nami.org

National Mental Health Association (NMHA)
2001 N. Beauregard Street,
12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
800-969-NMHA (6642)
www.nmha.org



One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigmas associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.

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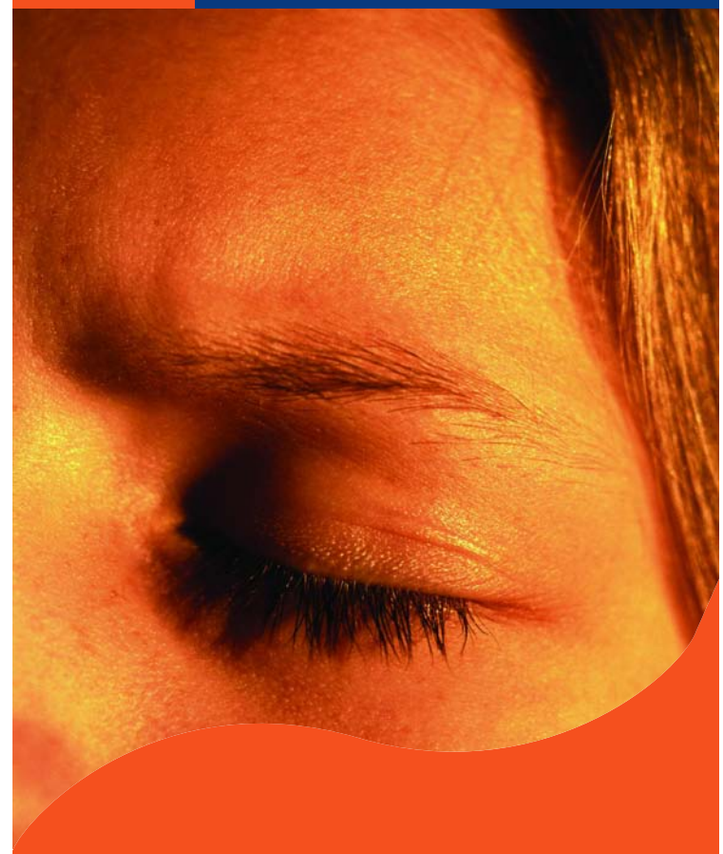

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