

What is Mental Illness?



*Questions and Answers
About Mental Illness
and Treatment*



What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness is a disturbance of the mind that interferes with normal behavior and makes daily life difficult. It can alter the ways you view yourself, your relationships, and your decisions. Mental health problems are real, and are caused by biology, environment, or a combination of the two.



Anxiety Disorders include phobias, panic attacks, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. *Depression* includes persistent unhappiness, pessimism, apathy, and/or suicidal or violent thoughts. *Schizophrenia* is characterized by bizarre thinking and behavior, withdrawal, and/or hallucinations.

Mental health problems are not your fault. They don't mean you are weak or a failure. If you think you are suffering from a mental illness, know that you're not alone. Each year, mental illnesses affect one out of five people.

Mental illnesses usually develop slowly, and can be difficult to diagnose. Just remember, while everyone experiences sadness or worry sometimes, it is when these feelings become severe and persistent that a serious problem may exist. For questions, be sure to consult a mental health professional.

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS

SILENT, LISTLESS BEHAVIOR Remoteness, withdrawn behavior and loss of interest in the family, play or work.

SUDDEN CHANGES IN MOOD Poor performance at work or school; inability to make decisions; abusiveness towards others; and lavish excitement, followed by deep depression, sadness, and hostility.

UNWARRANTED SUSPICION Claims of persecution or suspicion could indicate problems.

HALLUCINATIONS Hearing voices, seeing visions, etc.

UNWARRANTED ANXIETY Prolonged or severe uneasiness or fear can interfere with daily living.

PHYSICAL AILMENTS Physical complaints like insomnia or headaches can result from mental illness.

Where Can I Go to Find Help?

If you think you or a family member has a problem, there are a number of sources of information and help. In emergency situations, most cities have crisis centers or telephone hotlines available 24-hours a day to provide assistance. If nothing else, call your local hospital emergency room for a referral to a mental health professional.

In non-emergency situations, there are a number of avenues to mental health services, depending upon the care you need and your financial circumstances. Many people access services through their health insurance. Texas requires employer-provided health insurance plans to include mental health coverage, but allows some restrictions and exemptions that could affect your coverage. Check your policy or ask your employer. You also may want to consult a trusted professional familiar with questions about mental health—say a family doctor or member of the clergy.



When concerned about a child, parents often turn to a teacher or pediatrician. Schools and teachers can often identify potential mental or behavioral problems in children and can refer families to appropriate services.

Families of limited means might try local community mental health centers—the locally governed components of the state's public mental health system. Community mental health centers provide services in 43 communities across the state and are listed in the phone directory.

Where Can I Get More Information?

While getting professional help is important, remember that it is just as important for you and your family to be active participants in the treatment process. That means doing your best to understand the factors that contributed to your illness and what you can expect during treatment.

Mental health advocacy organizations—like the Mental Health Association In Texas, Texas Mental Health Consumers, and the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill-Texas—have local chapters across the state that focus upon mental health issues in their communities.

Afterwards, ask yourself whether this therapist is someone you felt comfortable with. Did they understand your problem and concerns? Did they seem knowledgeable? If the answer to any of these questions is no, keep looking. Your mental health is too important to endure a relationship with which you are uncomfortable or uncertain. Bad relationships not only fail to resolve problems, but in some cases can make them even worse.

ALWAYS REMEMBER: throughout your treatment you have the right to be treated with dignity. You have the right to a clear explanation of your condition and treatment. You have the right to confidentiality and privacy resulting from your treatment. Most importantly, you have the right to informed consent (i.e., knowing and understanding the potential risks and benefits of a treatment or procedure).

KEYS TO QUALITY CARE

Quality mental health care is composed of four main elements that are key in helping you on the road to recovery.

PREVENTION Your mental health care provider will likely discuss a number of strategies—including identifying stressors and building support systems—that can help correct or prevent problems.

EARLY DETECTION Early identification of a possible mental illness can help to improve treatment and minimize negative impacts.

TREATMENT Treating mental illnesses requires an active partnership between you and your mental health provider. Together you should consider the biological, psychological, and social aspects of your problem and select the most appropriate treatment.

EDUCATION Mental health care providers should help educate you and your family about your illness. Knowing the signs and symptoms of a problem, the modes of treatment, and the ways to prevent a relapse, are essential to maintaining a high level of wellness.

How Might My Family Be Affected?

The relationship between mental illness and family is complicated. When confronting the challenges of a family member with mental illness, most families are unprepared for the potential emotional stress and financial tensions that can arise during the recovery process.

Failing to deal with problems only serves to make them worse. Patience and understanding should be your guidewords in working through any rough patches. Many people find that family therapy sessions or support groups can provide guidance.



POTENTIAL NEGATIVE FEELINGS

DENIAL Some families ignore problems so as to avoid consequences. Delay almost always makes things worse.

FEAR What we imagine is usually worse than reality. Talking about your worries and concerns with a qualified professional could allay your fears.

GUILT Don't dwell on guilt or blame. Remember that there are many complex causes of mental illness. What's important is getting help.

HOSTILITY Some family members may blame the person experiencing a mental illness for causing worry, shame, or financial stress. Remember, mental illness is a genuine affliction which is treatable.

STIGMA Some people are ashamed that mental illness exists within their family, leading them to withdraw from friends, classmates, or co-workers. Such reclusiveness can create its own problems. Honesty about the problem shows courage and maturity.

How Might I Help a Troubled Loved One?

There are many ways you can help someone suffering a mental illness—mostly by giving them love and support. Overcoming a mental disorder can be the loneliest, most challenging task someone will ever undertake. Family can often be essential to the successful treatment and recovery of those suffering a mental illness. In fact, family support can make all the difference in the world.

Perhaps the family's most critical role is helping to cope with labeling and social stigma. Even the most undramatic of conditions—such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or mild depression—can affect the way someone is viewed by others and how he thinks of himself.

Learn all you can about the disorder and maybe contact a local support group. Most importantly, do not ignore symptoms. Early acceptance, diagnosis, and treatment are critical to successful recovery.



With that in mind, remember to be sympathetic to what the loved one is going through and firmly encourage them to get help. Involve them in group or family activities—even something as easy as grocery shopping or washing the car—to minimize the chances for dwelling upon the problem. Avoid awkward or demanding situations, but at the same time, do not permit or facilitate unreasonable demands or behavior. Most of all, **DO NOT GET DISCOURAGED**. Just as mental illnesses can sometimes be slow to develop or recognize, so can the effectiveness of medication and/or therapy.

Remember, early detection, acceptance, and treatment are the keys to ensuring successful treatment of mental illness. Getting the help, support, and professional treatment necessary for mental illnesses is the surest way to ensure the recovery of happier and healthier lives.

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Mental Health Resources

Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation

800-252-8154
www.mhmr.state.tx.us

Mental Health Association In Texas

512-454-3706
www.mhatexas.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-Texas

512-693-2000
tx.nami.org

Texas Mental Health Consumers

512-451-3191
www.tmhc.org

Texas Society of Psychiatric Physicians

512-478-0605
www.texmed.org/lis/sss/tspp.asp

Texas Psychological Association

888-872-3435
www.texaspsyc.org

Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse

800-832-9623
www.tcada.state.tx.us

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

301-443-8956
www.samhsa.gov

National Institute of Mental Health

301-443-4513
www.nimh.nih.gov

Hogg Foundation for Mental Health

888-404-4336
www.hogg.utexas.edu