

IS IT ALL IN MY HEAD? WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Last month we discussed mental health - that sense of self-confidence, engagement, and daily functioning we all strive for. But how do we know when we are not mentally healthy? How do we know when we have slipped from a temporary low into a disorder? Mental illness is subject of this month's Medical Minute.

We have heard various terms for mental disorder. Other than thinking things like that person is a "bit off", do we understand what it means to have a mental illness? It is important to have knowledge because mental health issues are common. In fact, we could say there is a mental health crisis going on giving the rapidly increasing numbers of people seeking services for serious mental health issues. Mental disorders affect one of four people at some point during their life. According to the New York Times, mental illness is the leading cause of disability in children. While mental illness occurs at anytime in life, about three fourths of all mental health problems begin by age 24. This means mental disorders could easily affect you or someone you love.

A mental disorder, also called a mental illness or psychiatric disorder, is a diagnosis by a mental health professional. A mental disorder is one aspect of mental health and like mental health is on a spectrum, it may be mild and have a limited impact on daily life or be totally incapacitating. It is a behavioral or mental pattern that causes suffering or a poor ability to function in life. Symptoms may be persist-

ent, relapsing and remitting, or occur as a single episode. Mental disorders are a blend of how a person thinks, feels and behaves. They range from psychosis such as schizophrenia to serious emotional problems like panic disorder, major depression, and personality disorders. Other problems like post-traumatic stress disorder and post partum depression are also on the spectrum of mental disorders when they impair normal functioning.

The causes of mental disorders are often unclear and are the subject of ongoing debate in the medical field. Theories combine ideas from a range of fields and suggest multiple, linking causes. Genetics, environment and lifestyle influence whether someone develops a mental health condition. A stressful job or home life makes some people more susceptible, as do traumatic life events like being the victim of a crime or abuse. Biochemical processes and basic brain structure may play a role. Cultural and religious beliefs and social norms must be taken into account when making a diagnosis.

In summary, mental illness refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders/ health conditions involving:

- Significant changes in thinking, emotion and/or behavior
- Distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities

Many people who have a mental illness do

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not want to talk about it and even try to hide what they are experiencing. They feel embarrassed or afraid about what they are thinking or feeling. They fear being judged, laughed at or if they are struggling with psychosis may believe there is nothing wrong with them. Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical condition like heart disease or diabetes. Most mental health conditions are very treatable. We are continually expanding our understanding of how the human brain works and developing effective treatments to help people successfully manage mental health conditions. In fact, the development of effective treatments over the last twenty-five years has been amazing. Services are usually community based in clinics such as Affiliated Clinical Services. If necessary psychiatric hospitalizations help the person stabilize and return to their community. Psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and clinical social workers assess and diagnosis mental health problems. Once an accurate diagnosis is made, appropriate mental health professionals provide treatment. Psychotherapy and psychiatric medication are two major treatment options.

There is no need to suffer alone. If you think you or someone you know is struggling with a mental health problem, make a call that can start you on the path to those feelings of well being and happiness.