

I'M NOT CRAZY. AM I? WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

When I began to work as a mental health therapist people were ashamed and afraid to enter therapy. They thought it meant they were crazy. They did not understand what mental health and mental illness were and believed a diagnosis meant they had a terrible character defect or were sinful. They lived in fear of ridicule and rejection. Things have improved since then and people are much more willing to enter therapy for all sorts of issues. However, the definition of mental illness is still somewhat misunderstood and has a negative connotation.

Let's get a few things straight!

1. **Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of.**

It is a medical problem like heart disease or diabetes. Mental illness does not discriminate; it can affect anyone regardless of your age, gender, geography, income, social status, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, background or other aspect of cultural identity. You, me, anyone can develop mental illness. While mental illness occurs at any age, three-fourths of all mental illness begins by age 24.

2. **Mental illness is common.** Nearly one in five U.S. adults experience some form of mental illness. One in 24 has a serious mental illness and one in 12 has a substance use disorder.

3. **Mental illness is treatable.** The vast majority of people with a mental illness continue to function in their daily lives.

Now that we have that out of the way, let's learn about what mental illness is and what to do if you or someone you know is mentally ill.

Mental illnesses take many forms. Some are mild and only interfere in limited ways with daily life.

Others are so severe that a person may need hospital care. Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions - disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Mental illness includes severe depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors.

Many people have mental health concerns from time to time. Emotional ups and downs are part of living a full life. Concerns soon subside and we feel better. Mental health concerns become mental illness when persistent signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and disrupt your ability to function. They stay and become worse or a chronic part of daily life.

The cause of mental illness comes from a combination of factors:

- **Inherited traits.** Mental illness is more common in people whose blood relatives have a mental illness. Certain genes may increase your risk of developing a mental illness. Life situations may trigger it.

- **Environmental exposures before birth.** Exposure to environmental stressors, inflammatory conditions, toxins, alcohol/drugs in the womb are sometimes linked to mental illness.

- **Brain chemistry.** Neurotransmitters are naturally occurring brain chemicals that carry signals to your brain and body. When neural networks are impaired function of nerve receptors and nerve systems change leading to depression.

Certain factors increase your risk of developing mental health problems:

- Biological relatives with mental illness
- Stressful life situations, such as financial problems,

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divorce, or a loved one's death

- An ongoing medical condition, such as diabetes
- Brain damage as a result of a serious injury (traumatic brain injury)
- Traumatic experiences, such as military combat or being assaulted
- Use of alcohol /drugs
- Abuse/neglect as a child
- Few healthy relationships
- A previous mental illness

Mental illness may be temporary or long term. If untreated it causes severe emotional, behavioral, and physical health problems. You cannot prevent mental illness, however it can be managed by taking appropriate steps. Pay attention to warning signs and symptoms. Get a medical examination. Some medical conditions show signs similar to mental illness. Physicians will make appropriate referrals when mental illness is suspected. Get help early. Mental illness is tougher to treat if symptoms are allowed to worsen. Take good care of yourself in regards to healthy eating, sleeping, and physical activity.

If you or a loved one is showing signs of mental illness ACS has an excellent team of experienced professionals to help you begin the road to recovery.