Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding common mental illnesses



A chronic illness can disrupt the entire family. Adults are concerned, maybe confused and sad, children can be upset because they feel ignored and unimportant and caregivers are often exhausted, overwhelmed angry and feeling guilty. Everyone's stress levels rise. When a loved one experiences a mental illness, some families can also feel embarrassment, shame and/or a reluctance to seek professional care. Without treatment, any illness can become worse, further harming the individual – and those who care about him or her

The first step in dealing with any illness is to understand what it is, what it does and how it can be treated. Armed with the right information, patients and their families are better able to withstand any health care challenges that come their way.

What is mental illness?

Mental or psychological health involves how we feel, perceive, think, communicate and understand the world around us. When we are mentally unwell, we experience alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour that cause us distress and impair how we function in life.

There are more than 200 types of mental illness, but the most common are:

- **Anxiety disorders** are the most prevalent mental illnesses and include Panic Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and General Anxiety Disorder. While it's normal to feel anxious now and then, an Anxiety Disorder can cause overwhelming and constant worry and fear that can be debilitating. However, with treatment, many people can get back to a busy and fulfilling life.
- **Mood disorders** involve changes and disruptions in mood and emotions. Feeling extremely sad or extremely happy from time to time is part of being human, but people with a mood disorders

experience these feelings with greater intensity and for longer periods of time. Depression and bipolar disorder are two examples of mood disorders.
- **Eating disorders** involve a distorted body image and extreme behaviours to manage food intake and weight. Disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating were once thought to only affect females, but in fact, one in three sufferers is male.
- **Schizophrenia** is an illness affecting the normal functioning of the brain. It is not a "split" personality but rather difficulty thinking, speaking or interacting in an organized way. It often involves confused thinking, delusions and hallucinations that make it hard for a person to know what's real and what isn't. Psychosis can be part of schizophrenia but may also be seen on its own or with other disorders.
- **Personality disorders** affect the way a person acts, feels and gets along with other people. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are two examples.
- **Addiction** to prescription medication, illegal drugs or alcohol is often intertwined with mental illnesses. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) drug abuse may cause mental illness. The NIDA states that drugs like meth, cocaine and heroin can cause changes in brain chemistry that lead to mood disorders, cognitive impairment, depression or anxiety. Conversely many people with a mental illness self-medicate with alcohol or drugs to manage their symptoms.

Depression

Depression is now the fourth leading cause of disability and premature death in the world. The World Health Organization has stated that by 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability and death after heart disease. Although depression is extremely common, misconceptions still cause people to not seek professional help with often serious consequences. Depression is not just feeling down and sad or something that you can "snap out of" if you try hard enough. Depression involves feelings of despair and hopelessness that last for weeks or months or years. It is a serious medical condition that requires specialized treatment.

Depression strikes people of any age – including children – and every socioeconomic background. Each person experiences the illness differently but here are some of the more common symptoms of depression:

- Ongoing feelings of sadness, tearfulness, hopeless, worthlessness or emptiness
- Angry outbursts, irritability, or frustration, even over small things
- Anxiety
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usually-enjoyed activities
- Change in weight or appetite
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Decreased energy or fatigue (without significant physical exertion)
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches
- Poor concentration of difficulty making decisions
- Changes in appetite — often reduced appetite and weight loss, but increased cravings for food and weight gain in some people
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide

If you or someone you know has had any of these symptoms most days for more than two or three weeks, contact your doctor, or a registered mental health professional to discuss the symptoms. It is important to note that both physical and mental illness, however severe, respond best when diagnosed properly and treated early.

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