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Learn

Mental Illness: Myths and Facts

Mental illnesses are very common. They are also widely misunderstood. People with mental illnesses are frequently stigmatized by others who think it's an uncommon condition. The truth is, mental illness can happen to anybody.

Arm yourself with the facts, then use your knowledge to educate others and reach out to those around you with mental illness. Understanding and support are powerful, and they can make a real difference in the life of a person who needs them.

Myth: There's no hope for people with mental illnesses.

Fact: There are more treatments, services, and community support systems than ever before, and more are in the works. People with mental illnesses lead active, productive lives.

Myth: I can't do anything for a person with mental illness.

Fact: You can do a lot, starting with how you act and speak. You can create an environment that builds on people's strengths and promotes understanding. For example:

- Don't label people with words like "crazy," "wacko," or "loony" or define them by their diagnosis. Instead of saying someone is "a schizophrenic," say he or she "has schizophrenia." Don't say "a schizophrenic person," say "a person with schizophrenia." This is called "people-first" language, and it's important to make a distinction between the person and the illness.
- Learn the facts about mental health and share them with others, especially if you hear something that isn't true.
- Treat people with mental illnesses with respect and dignity, just as you would anybody else.
- Respect the rights of people with mental illnesses and don't discriminate against them when it comes to housing, employment, or education. Like other people with disabilities, people with mental health problems are protected under federal and state laws.

Myth: People with mental illnesses are violent and unpredictable.

Fact: Actually, the vast majority of people with mental health conditions are no more violent than anyone else. People with mental illnesses are much more likely to be the victims of crime. You probably know someone with a mental illness and don't even realize it.

Myth: Mental illnesses don't affect me.

Fact: Mental illnesses are surprisingly common; they affect almost every family in America. Mental illnesses do not discriminate—they can affect anyone.

Myth: Mental illness is the same as mental retardation.

Fact: These are different conditions. Mental retardation is characterized by limitations in intellectual

functioning and difficulties with certain daily living skills. In contrast, people with mental illnesses—health conditions that cause changes in a person's thinking, mood, and behavior—have varied intellectual functioning, just like the general population.

Myth: Mental illnesses are brought on by a weakness of character.

Fact: Mental illnesses are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Social influences, like the loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various mental health problems.

Myth: People with mental illnesses cannot tolerate the stress of holding down a job.

Fact: All jobs are stressful to some extent. Anybody is more productive when there's a good match between the employee's needs and the working conditions, whether or not the worker has a mental health problem.

Myth: People with mental health needs, even those who have recovered, tend to be second-rate workers.

Fact: Employers who have hired people with mental illnesses report good attendance and punctuality as well as motivation, good work, and job tenure on par with or greater than other employees. Studies by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) show that there are no differences in productivity when people with mental illnesses are compared to other employees. (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999)

Myth: Once people develop mental illnesses, they will never recover.

Fact: Studies show that most people with mental illnesses get better, and many recover completely. Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery.

Myth: Therapy and self-help are a waste of time. Why bother when you can just take a pill?

Fact: Treatment varies depending on the individual. A lot of people work with therapists, counselors, friends, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers during the recovery process. They also use self-help strategies and community supports. Often they combine these with some of the most advanced medications available.

Myth: Children don't experience mental illnesses. Their actions are just products of bad parenting.

Fact: A report from the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health showed that in any given year five to nine percent of children experience serious emotional disturbances. Just like adult mental illnesses, these are clinically diagnosable health conditions that are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors.

Myth: Children misbehave or fail in school just to get attention.

Fact: Behavior problems can be symptoms of emotional, behavioral, or mental problems, rather than merely attention-seeking devices. These children can succeed in school with appropriate understanding, attention, and mental health services.

