

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

The term mental health is commonly used in reference to mental illness. However, knowledge in the field has progressed to a level that appropriately differentiates the two. Although mental health and mental illness are related, they represent different psychological states.

MENTAL HEALTH BASICS

Mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” It is estimated that only about 17% of U.S adults are considered to be in a state of optimal mental health. There is emerging evidence that positive mental health is associated with improved health outcomes.

Mental illness is defined as “collectively all diagnosable mental disorders” or “health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning.” Depression is the most common type of mental illness, affecting more than 26% of the U.S. adult population.

Evidence has shown that mental disorders, especially depressive disorders, are strongly related to the occurrence and course of many chronic diseases including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and obesity and many risk behaviors for chronic disease; such as, physical inactivity, smoking, excessive drinking, and insufficient sleep.

MENTAL HEALTH INDICATORS

In the health care and public health arena, more emphasis and resources have been devoted to screening, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illness than mental health. Little has been done to protect the mental health of those free of mental illness. Researchers suggest that there are indicators of mental health, representing three domains.

These include the following:

- ✓ Emotional well-being, such as perceived life satisfaction, happiness, cheerfulness, peacefulness.
- ✓ Psychological well-being, such as self-acceptance, personal growth including openness to new experiences, optimism, hopefulness, purpose in life, control of one's environment, spirituality, self-direction, and positive relationships.
- ✓ Social well-being, such as social acceptance, beliefs in the potential of people and society as a whole, personal self-worth and usefulness to society, sense of community.

There are social determinants of mental health as there are social determinants of general health that need to be in place to support mental health. These include adequate housing, safe neighborhoods, equitable jobs and wages, quality education, and equity in access to health care.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

WHAT IS GOOD EMOTIONAL HEALTH?

People who are emotionally healthy are in control of their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Even people who have good emotional health can sometimes have emotional problems or mental illness. Mental illness often has a physical cause, such as a chemical imbalance in the brain. Stress and problems with family, work or school can sometimes trigger mental illness or make it worse. However, people who are emotionally healthy have learned ways to cope with stress and problems. They know when to seek help from their doctor or a counselor.

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT MY EMOTIONS?

Your body responds to stress by making stress hormones. These hormones help your body respond to situations of extreme need, such as when you are in danger. But when your body makes too many of these hormones for a long period of time, the hormones wear down your body – and your emotions. People who are under stress a lot are often emotional, anxious, irritable and even depressed. Relaxation methods, such as deep breathing and meditation, and exercise are also useful ways to cope with stress.

WHAT ABOUT ANGER?

People are sometimes not aware of what causes their anger, how much anger they are holding inside or how to express anger appropriately. You may be angry about certain events, your own actions or other people's actions. If you find yourself becoming increasingly irritable or taking unhealthy risks (such as drinking too much or abusing drugs), you may have a problem dealing with anger. It's very important to talk with your doctor or a counselor about getting help.

WHAT CAN I DO TO AVOID PROBLEMS?

Try to be more aware of your emotions and reactions. Learn to identify and address the reasons for sadness, frustration and anger in your life.

- ✔ Learn to express your feelings in appropriate ways. It's important to let people close to you know when something is bothering you. Keeping feelings of sadness or anger inside takes extra energy. It can also cause problems in your relationships and at work or school.
- ✔ Think before you act. Before you get carried away by your emotions and say or do something you might regret, give yourself time to think.
- ✔ Strive for balance in your life. Make time for things you enjoy. Focus on positive things in your life.
- ✔ Take care of your physical health by exercising regularly, eating healthy meals and getting enough sleep. Don't abuse drugs or alcohol. Your physical health can affect your emotional health.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

WHAT IS DEPRESSION AND HOW IS IT TREATED?

When doctors talk about depression, they mean the medical illness called major depression. Someone who has major depression has symptoms nearly every day, all day, for 2 weeks or longer. There is also a minor form of depression that causes less severe symptoms. Both kinds of depression have the same causes and treatment. A person who has depression can't control his or her feelings.

Depression can be treated with medicine, counseling or both. A nutritious diet, exercising on a regular basis, and avoiding alcohol, drugs, and too much caffeine can also help. Talk to your doctor to find the right treatment for you.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a word that describes feelings of worry, nervousness, fear, apprehension, concern or restlessness. Normal feelings of anxiety often serve as an "alarm system," alerting you to danger. But sometimes anxiety can be out of control, giving you a sense of dread and fear for no apparent reason. This kind of anxiety can disrupt your life and can include a general feeling of worry, a sudden attack of panicky feelings, or a fear of a certain situation or object.

WHAT IS GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER AND HOW IS IT TREATED?

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is ongoing anxiety that isn't related to a particular event or situation, or is out of proportion to what you would expect. For instance, a person who has generalized anxiety disorder may constantly worry about a child who is perfectly healthy. About 4 million adults in the United States have GAD. Women are more likely to have it than men. It usually begins to affect people when they are in their early 20s.

People who have GAD must learn ways to cope with anxiety and worry. If you think you have GAD your doctor can help you form a plan to develop skills to cope with your anxiety. You'll probably need some counseling to help you figure out what's making you so tense. Also, you may need to take some medicine to help you feel less anxious. Your doctor can recommend the treatment that is right for you.

REFERENCES

All information sourced from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and FamilyDoctor.org, a resource operated by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)