Health Basics A-Z

Mental Health

What Is Mental Illness?
Mental illness refers to any health problem of a psychological nature. Some of the most common mental illnesses include depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. Other mental illnesses include schizophrenia, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

People of all ages, races and nationalities experience mental illness. In fact, depression has been documented in every culture around the world. Depression is the most common cause of disability in the United States. It is also one of the health conditions least likely to be treated, probably because of the misunderstandings about depression and the stigma associated with mental health and seeking help.

If you suspect you or a loved one is experiencing mental illness, remember these three key messages:

- You are not alone. Mental illness is remarkably common.
- Treatment does work for most people. It ranges from therapy to medication.
- Don’t suffer in silence. Reach out for professional help.

Are Latinos at Higher Risk for Mental Illness?
The question of whether Latinos differ from non-Hispanic whites in terms of mental illness is difficult to answer. It appears that Latinos might be less likely to suffer from certain conditions, like suicide, but more likely to suffer from other conditions due to the stresses of immigrations and acculturation.

While the overall suicide rate of Latinos is half that of the non-Hispanic white population, sup groups suffer more: suicide attempts for Latino girls, grades 9-12, were 80% higher than for white females in the same age group, in 2005 and the death rate from suicide for Latino men is five times the rate for Latina women.

In total, rates of various mental illnesses are fairly similar between Latinos and other racial and

ethnic groups. Unfortunately, Latinos are also among the least likely to have health insurance and to seek out and receive mental health care.

What Are the Symptoms of Mental Illness?
Feeling blue or anxious is part of the human experience. More extreme or lasting feelings of sadness or fear are also normal and appropriate responses to unusually stressful life events, such as divorce, unemployment or the death of a loved one.

When feelings of guilt, sadness, self-loathing, fear or anxiety preoccupy someone most of the time, for long periods of time, it can be a symptom of a serious problem. Specific symptoms can vary from disorder to disorder and from person to person. To view more information about the symptoms of depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, click here.

Is Mental Illness Preventable?
Scientists are still trying to understand the roots of mental illness. How much is biological-inherited through genes from generation to generation-and how much is based on a person's environment and upbringing? These are complicated questions, and the answers are likely to vary depending on the type and severity of the mental disorder.

Also, most people will experience extreme emotional stress at least once in their lives. Some of the most difficult stresses to cope with include-but aren't limited to-the death of a loved one, a divorce or breakup with a long-term partner, loss of a job or income, being in a serious accident or witnessing violence. These experiences, as painful as they may be, are guaranteed to cause major depression or crippling anxiety. They do, however, make it more likely that a person will either develop a mental illness or worsen an existing mental disorder.

Most people can do a lot, however, to enhance their emotional lives, guard against unnecessary stress and be more resilient in the face of emotionally difficult situations. These include:

- Eat healthy food
- Exercise regularly
- Sleep seven to nine hours each night
- Moderate alcohol intake, and avoid heavy drugs
- Nurture healthy, constructive relationships with family and friends, and minimize unhealthy relationships

- Develop achievable goals about career and money
- Set aside time for enjoyable activities and relaxation
- Adopt positive thinking habits

What Are the Treatment Options for Mental Illness?
Treatment for various kinds of mental illness can include lifestyle changes, psychological counseling and medication. Depending on the type and severity of the disorder, a treatment plan might incorporate only one of these-or a combination of all of them. Some illnesses require only short-term course of action, while others currently demand lifelong treatment.

Follow the links for more information on treatments for depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. [Link to various treatment pages, hyperlinking the names of the illnesses to the respective treatment page]

Where to Go for Help?
Finding quality mental health care can be a challenge. It helps to be persistent and to do your homework. If you are in the grip of a serious mental illness, however, it can be difficult to push for the best treatment and to explore all your options. Reading about depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder and their treatments on this site can be a good starting place. You can also turn to these sources for assistance in finding help.

- If you are having thoughts of wanting to harm yourself, or if a loved one has expressed suicidal thoughts, call a suicide prevention hotline right away at 1.800.SUICIDE (1.800.784.2433) or 1.800.273.TALK (1.800.273.8255).
- Ask your primary health care provider for a referral to a therapist or a psychiatrist.
- Contact the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to see whether it has a chapter in your area that can, in turn, provide a list of local providers.
- Contact the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) for assistance and information about providers near you.
- If you have health insurance, contact your insurance company to understand your benefits and

for a referral to a local mental health care provider. Be forewarned, however, that many states allow health insurance companies to offer far less coverage for mental health treatment than for other types of health problems. Furthermore, a fair number of psychiatrists and therapists do not accept health insurance. In this case, however, you might be able to pay the mental health care provider up-front and submit a claim for reimbursement from your health insurance company.

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