

What is Mental Illness- Signs and Symptoms

While mental health can mean many things to many people, self-esteem and the capacity to care about others are universally important components of mental health. Mentally healthy people understand they are not perfect nor can they be all things to all people. They experience a full range of emotions including sadness, anger, and frustration as well as joy, love, and satisfaction. While they typically can handle life's challenges and changes, they can reach out for help if they are having difficulty dealing with major traumas and transitions-loss of loved ones, marriage difficulties, school or work problems, the prospect of retirement.

Our emotions and our mental well being are just as important as our physical well being. In fact, in many ways our physical well being depends on our mental well being. Catching personal problems early can help prevent bigger, more complicated problems later on. This is particularly true in the case of psychiatric and substance abuse problems.

Even when you try your best, you will still experience periods of frustration and unhappiness. Usually, with time, you will overcome your distress. But you should learn to recognize when your problems- or those of your loved ones-are too much to handle alone. You can help yourself, your family, and your friends by knowing when to ask for professional help. Some of the warning signs include:

- Undue prolonged anxiety. This is an anxiety out of proportion to any identifiable reason or cause. A state of almost constant tension and fear that may fasten itself to one cause or another-is a signal that help is needed.
- Prolonged or severe depression. People who suffer from clinical depression are experiencing more than just a passing funk that lifts in a few days. Clinical depression strongly affects thinking, feelings, and behavior. People who have depression experience at least five of the following symptoms, which must include the first or second nearly every day, all day, for at least two weeks:
 - Persistent feelings of sadness or emptiness
 - Loss of interest or pleasure in activities or hobbies that were once enjoyed, including sex.

- Feelings of helplessness, guilt and worthlessness
 - Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
 - Change in appetite
 - Decreased energy, fatigue, and feeling “slowed down”
 - Restlessness and irritability
 - Difficulty concentrating and remembering
 - Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts
 - Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to medical treatment
- Abrupt changes in mood or behavior. Serious alterations in an individual's normal habits or way of thinking. Also, frequent or regular mood changes from highs to lows, whether gradual or abrupt, can signal a mood disorder
 - Physical symptoms that may be related to tension. Some bodily ailments and complaints-headaches, nausea, or unexplained pains- may have no identifiable cause, any persistent physical ailment should be checked by a doctor.

If any of the warning signs or symptoms described above are severe or long lasting, whether caused by a medical illness or not, professional help may be needed.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1992). *You Are Not Alone; Brochure*. Washington, DC.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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