

Mental Health FOR EVERYONE





UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Health is often thought of as something someone has or does not have. In fact, like physical health, there is a wide range of mental health or illness. Rather than being 100% mentally healthy or 100% mentally unhealthy, we all fall somewhere on that continuum. Where a person falls on that continuum can vary from day to day. Even for people with mental health diagnoses, there will be days in which they are impacted more than on other days. In addition, people who are considered mentally healthy can have episodes of situational depression or anxiety that impact their ability to manage their lives as they would like.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

When we look at mental health as an all-or-nothing situation, we are likely to overlook or minimize our own mental health needs. With a traditional model of mental illness, people are not taught to be aware of their mental health until there is “disorder,” evidence that life is being negatively impacted. This is the equivalent of not watching what we eat until we have a medical diagnosis. Our mental health is something

we can monitor daily. You might ask yourself what your stress level is at any given time, or how energized you feel to do things you enjoy. Taking this self-monitoring approach, we can practice self-care proactively. By doing so, we are more likely to avoid mental health disturbance or to have less intense and pervasive symptoms.

SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Mental health can vary widely but often includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes. Common emotional symptoms indicating problems include persistent sadness, anxiety, or mood swings. Cognitive symptoms may be exhibited as difficulty concentrating, memory difficulties, or distorted thinking patterns, such as excessive guilt or hopelessness. Behavioral changes can include withdrawal from social interactions, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, or engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviors. Physical symptoms, such as unexplained aches or fatigue, may also be mental health symptoms.



WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms above, it's probably warranted to talk with someone. That might look like talking to a loved one you trust or practicing stress reduction techniques. If the distress persists, maybe it is time to look for someone with mental health expertise. Your Assistance Program can help you express your concerns and find solutions to existing stressors. It can also help you obtain additional referrals or support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT AND SUPPORT

Addressing mental health concerns related to symptoms rather than relying solely on a mental health diagnosis allows for early intervention and prevention. People are more likely to talk about their own experiences with mental health struggles if mental health is discussed more openly, without stigma. In addition, the continuum approach encourages personalized treatment approaches. A diagnosis can be very helpful in treating mental health concerns that have pronounced and pervasive impacts on functioning. But prior to diagnosable mental illness, there are usually signs and symptoms of mental health challenges. If those signs and symptoms are addressed early, with attention to an individual's symptoms, challenges, needs, and strengths, there is an improved opportunity for the prevention of worsening symptoms.

Once action steps are identified to help a person with their mental health challenges, it is important to continue to monitor the support as well as conduct regular self-check-ins to ensure the opportunity for early intervention if mental health symptoms occur. Lastly, engage people you trust to communicate with you about external changes they see. For example, ask a friend to check in with you if they don't hear from you for two weeks – a possible sign that depression might be taking hold. Or ask your spouse to give you a gentle nudge to call your therapist if they notice you are avoiding social interactions more than usual.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although mental health and mental illness are often thought to be a black-or-white issue, there is actually a lot of gray. A person with a mental health disorder can experience varying degrees of distress. The extent to which a person's life is impaired by given symptoms varies a great deal as well. People can experience functional impairment without a diagnosis. In addition, people with mental illness, even severe mental illness, are said to have periods of flourishing or languishing. It is important to open up communication about mental health to include all of these experiences.

If you are experiencing mental health concerns or distress, your Assistance Program can be a great place to start.