



What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness, as commonly understood, is the improper functioning of the brain, the most complex of all organs of the human body.

Such illnesses are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof).

Mental illness may occur at any age, with the initial onset of some types of mental illness manifesting in particular age ranges. For example, the onset of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder is particularly prevalent in the teenage years and early adulthood. Mental illness is also indiscriminate of gender, race, or socioeconomic background.

Our understanding of mental illness, and mental health, is constantly changing and expanding. However, at present, there are several key facts that are known. A mental illness: (a) may involve a number of different conditions; (b) can occur at any age to anyone; (c) manifests itself in a range of severity; (d) is cyclical in nature; and (e) encompasses biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of the individual.

According to "Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General", an estimated 22 to 23 percent of the U.S. population experiences a mental disorder in any given year, but almost half of these individuals do not seek treatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; U.S. Surgeon General, 2001). Of these, approximately 6%, or 1 in 17 individuals experience a severe and persistent mental illness. These illnesses are constant or frequently recurring, and significantly interfere with one's ability to function in family, job, school, community.

These severe and persistent mental illnesses include:

Schizophrenia;

Bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness);

Schizoaffective disorder or some types of major depressive disorder;

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD);

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Certain other conditions, although they may co-occur, are mistakenly understood as mental illness: intellectual disabilities, dementia (Alzheimer's, vascular), and substance use disorders (drug/alcohol abuse and dependence).

Similar to other health conditions, proper diagnosis and treatment are critical in ensuring that the individual's mental health needs are properly addressed. Treatment of a mental illness may consist of medication, psychotherapy, or counseling (alone or in combination). Along with the various treatment modalities available, an individual's social well-being through positive family support, employment, friends, and hobbies are equally important in providing the appropriate care required by an individual.

One must acknowledge that the treatment objective of mental illness does not necessarily involve the eradication, i.e., cure, of the condition, but rather its on-going management so as to minimize the adverse effects of the mental illness on the everyday functioning of the individual.

Excerpted from: "Welcomed and Valued: Building Faith Communities of Support and Hope with People with Mental Illness and Their Families" [<http://www.miministry.org/ResourceBinder.pdf>], published by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, 2009

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