

Living Successfully with Mental Illness

Employers, friends, and neighbors may be very uncomfortable about mental illness. Many people would rather avoid the issue than deal with it. They find it embarrassing and scary. The stigma can be worse than the illness itself. One survey found that workers are more likely to tell their boss they were involved in a petty crime than to explain they had a mental illness. Yet major depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide.

The facts about mental illness:

- A mental illness is a brain disorder that affects your thinking, feeling, moods, and ability to relate to others. Mental illness is real illness. Many mental illnesses have well known causes and many treatment options.
- Mental illnesses are more common than cancer, diabetes, or heart disease. Mental illnesses can affect people of any age, race, religion, or income.
- One in five families is affected by a severe mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or major depression.

Help educate others about your mental illness. People respond well to information that's presented in a way they can understand and use. Encourage family, friends, and coworkers to ask questions. Take the hush out of it. Let them know that they don't need to avoid you or try to shelter you from living.

Here are some ideas that may help you to live successfully with mental illness:

- Learn everything you can about your illness, including treatment options and what you can do for yourself. Read books and articles, research on the Internet, talk with your therapist, family, and friends until you feel you know what your illness is all about.
- Accept the fact that you have a mental illness. This can be difficult, but it's the first step towards recovery. Understand that it is not your fault that you have the illness.
- Take responsibility for managing your illness. Evaluate your strengths and the limitations from your illness. Set realistic short-term goals (for today, for this week, for this month) and long-term goals (for this year, for your lifetime). Ask for help from your therapist, friends, and family in this process. Allow yourself some leeway in what you expect of yourself.
- Take care of your physical health. Eat a well-balanced diet, exercise regularly, and sleep as much as you need to feel rested. Don't have too much alcohol or caffeine.
- Structure your time. Make a list of the things you're going to do. Set realistic goals. Being active and organized may improve your sense of well-being. The body in motion may begin to heal the mind with the neurochemicals it makes.
- Join a support group for people with the kind of mental illness you have. The people in these groups can provide lots of advice, information, and support.
- If medicine is one of the ways to keep your illness in control, take your medicine regularly. If you have problems or questions related to your

medicine, talk it over with your prescriber. Don't make changes in your medicine by yourself.

- Help family members learn more about how to communicate with you. Criticism, even perceived criticism, is not helpful. Studies show that people with mental illness who are discharged from hospitals are more likely to relapse if they go home to family members who criticize them.
- Ask for help when you need it. Your support network may include a therapist and friends who will understand and not judge. A lot of intelligent, educated, and productive people need help and support at various times.
- Don't keep things from your therapist that may be important. The goal of therapy is to help you get better.
- Avoid illegal drugs. Don't use nicotine.
- Recovery isn't always quick and easy. There will be ups and downs. Be patient with yourself. Identify which stresses are the most difficult ones for you and find specific ways to manage each one of them.
- Plan what to do if symptoms of your illness return (relapse). Make a detailed, specific list of early warning signs. Write out a plan of action to reduce stress and increase support whenever those warning signs occur. Involve your therapist, friends, and family. If you deal with a relapse early, it can usually be kept mild or prevented altogether.

People with chronic physical illnesses can make adjustments and plan how to achieve their goals despite their illness. So can people who have mental illnesses.

The fact that you have a mental illness is no more important than the fact that you are intelligent, competent, or have a college degree. You are not your illness. It is one aspect of who you are. Mental illness, like diabetes or arthritis, can be unpleasant, but you can live a satisfying life in spite of it.

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