

Mental Health: Myth vs. Reality

Source: USA Weekend (www.usaweekend.com)

*In their **Health Smart Midweek Section**, USA Weekend (www.usaweekend.com) gathered some of the top experts from different medical associations to set the record straight on some of the most talked about health conditions. One of the conditions the web site focused on was mental health and mental illness. (June 16, 2008)*

An estimated 60 million Americans age 18 and older -- about 25% of the adult population -- suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year, says the National Institute of Mental Health. Even famous author J.K. Rowling, creator of the Harry Potter series, suffered from depression and contemplated suicide. According to the World Health Organization, mental illnesses, including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, are among the 10 leading causes of disability in the United States and other developed countries, points out Dr. Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, chairman of the board of directors of Mental Health America (mentalhealthamerica.net). We asked Aguilar-Gaxiola to give us the myth-busting facts on mental illness.

Dr. Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola is chairman of the board of directors of Mental Health America, based in Alexandria, Va., and is professor of internal medicine and director of the Center for Reducing Health Disparities at the University of California at Davis School of Medicine in Sacramento.

Myth: Mental illnesses are only in your mind; they're not real illnesses.

Reality: Mental illnesses are serious medical conditions, just like cancer or diabetes, that can have a dramatic impact on a person's life, family and community and on society as a whole -- and they can be tremendously debilitating. Since 1996, we have more data on the impact of mental illnesses on functioning than we ever had before, thanks to "The Global Burden of Disease," a landmark study done by the Harvard School of Public Health. That study showed that, when compared with any other health condition, mental illnesses are among the most debilitating, and depression is the No. 1 cause of disability internationally.

Myth: Only crazy people are mentally ill.

Reality: There is nothing crazy or abnormal about people who have a mental illness. It's a very democratic condition; we are all at risk. We all likely have at least one relative, loved one, neighbor or co-worker who is living with a mental illness. Mental illnesses are just that -- illnesses.

What You Need to Know...



Myth: Treatment goes on forever and doesn't really help.

Reality: We know mental illnesses are, for the most part, highly treatable, and most people do get better when they're treated appropriately. For example, about 80% of people who seek treatment for depression -- one of the most treatable of all mental illnesses -- will improve with therapy or medication or a combination of the two. A diagnosis of depression does not mean you face a lifetime of analysis or medication. The myth that mentally ill people cannot get better perpetuates the barrier of stigma, embarrassment and fear that deters some people from recognizing and accepting that they have a mental illness -- and then seeking and receiving help.

Myth: Mental health isn't as important to your well-being as physical health is.

Reality: Mental health is an integral part of health. When our mental health is poor because of stress or other challenges in our lives, it can weaken the immune system and affect the entire body. We know that chronic stress can play a role in obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. People who feel depressed are overly stressed and may be at greater risk of physical illness.

Myth: Antidepressants cause children and teens to commit suicide.

Reality: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has issued warnings regarding the use of antidepressants in children because of the relative lack of research on the safety of those medications for youths. More recent studies indicate that the benefits of treatment with antidepressants appear to be greater than the small risk that patients' suicidal thoughts and behaviors would be increased by taking that medicine.

Myth: Changing behavior is easy. All it takes is willpower to overcome mental illness.

Reality: If changing behavior were easy, everyone would find it easy to lose weight and follow healthful habits. Those of us in the mental health field always are looking for ways to help people make behavioral changes so they can live healthy and fulfilling lives. For example, one of the most useful ways to effectively deal with depression is behavioral -- exercise, eat a balanced diet, relate to other people and do not get isolated, even when you feel like saying, "What's the use?"

Bottom Line: We cannot separate mental health from health in general. The fact is, good health begins with mental health.

www.mhawisconsin.org