

# Stigma: Building Awareness & Understanding

Mental illness can strike anyone. It knows no age limits, economic status, race, creed or color. During the course of a year, more than 57 million Americans are affected by one or more mental disorders.

Researchers have determined that many mental illnesses are the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. These imbalances may be inherited, or may develop because of excessive stress or substance abuse.

People with mental illnesses often exhibit many types of behaviors, such as extreme sadness and irritability. In severe cases, they may also suffer from hallucinations and total withdrawal. Instead of receiving compassion and acceptance, people with mental illnesses may experience hostility, discrimination and stigma.

## What is a mental illness?

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbance in thinking, perception and behavior. If these disturbances significantly impair a person's ability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines, then he or she should immediately see proper treatment with a mental health professional. With the care and treatment, a person can recover and resume normal activities. Many mental illnesses are believed to have biological causes, but some mental disorders are caused by a person's environment and experiences.

The five major categories of mental illness:

- **Anxiety Disorders:** The three main types are: phobias, panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. People who suffer from phobias experience extreme fear or dread of a particular object or situation. Panic disorder involves sudden, intense feelings of terror for no apparent reason and symptoms similar to a heart attack. People with obsessive compulsive disorder try to cope with anxiety by repeating words or phrases, or by engaging in repetitive, ritualistic behavior such as constant hand washing. Other anxiety disorders include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generalized anxiety disorder.
- **Mood Disorders:** Mood disorders include depression and bipolar disorder. Symptoms may include mood swings such as extreme sadness or elation, sleep and eating disturbances, and changes in activity and energy levels. Suicide may be a risk with these disorders.
- **Schizophrenia:** This disorder affects how a person thinks, feels, and acts. Schizophrenia is believed to be caused by chemical imbalances in the brain that produce a variety of symptoms including hallucinations, delusions, withdrawal, incoherent speech and impaired reasoning.
- **Dementias:** This group of disorders includes such diseases as Alzheimer's, which leads to loss of mental functions, including memory loss and a decline in intellectual and physical abilities.
- **Eating Disorders:** Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are serious, potentially life threatening illnesses. People with these disorders have a preoccupation with food and an irrational fear of being fat. Anorexia is self-starvation whereas bulimia involves cycles of bingeing and purging. Behavior may also include excessive exercise.



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## **Common misconceptions about mental illnesses**

**Myth:** People who need psychiatric care should be locked away in institutions.

**Fact:** Today, most people who have mental illnesses can lead productive lives within their communities thanks to a variety of supports, programs and/or medications.

**Myth:** People with mental illnesses are dangerous.

**Fact:** The vast majority of people with mental illnesses are not violent. In cases of violence, the incidence typically results from the same reasons it does the general public, such as feeling threatened, or due to excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs.

**Myth:** People with mental illnesses can work low-level jobs but aren't suited for really important or responsible positions.

**Fact:** People with mental illnesses, like everyone else, have the potential to work at any level depending on their own abilities, experience, and motivation.

## **How you can combat stigma:**

- Share your experience with mental illness. Your story can convey to others that having a mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. To read stories and post your own, visit [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/feelslike](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/feelslike).
- Help people with mental illnesses re-enter society. Support their efforts to obtain housing and jobs.
- Respond to false statements about or images of people with mental illnesses. Many people have wrong and damaging ideas about mental illnesses. Providing accurate facts and information may help change their ideas and actions.

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