

## **Stigma** **Building Awareness and Understanding about Mental Disorder**

Mental disorder can strike anyone! It knows no age limits, economic status, race, creed or color. During the course of a year, more than 54 million Americans are affected by one or more mental disorders.

Medical science has made incredible progress over the last century in helping us understand, curing and eliminating the causes of many diseases including mental disorders. However, while doctors continue to solve some of the mysteries of the brain, many of its functions remain a puzzle. Even at the leading research centers, no one fully understands how the brain works or why it malfunctions. However, researchers have determined that many mental disorders are probably the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. These imbalances may be inherited, or may develop because of excessive stress or substance abuse.

It is sometimes easy to forget that our brain, like all of our other organs, is vulnerable to disease. People with mental disorders often exhibit many types of behaviors such as extreme sadness and irritability, and in more severe cases, they may also suffer from hallucinations and total withdrawal. Instead of receiving compassion and acceptance, people with mental disorders may experience hostility, discrimination, and stigma.

### **Why Does Stigma Still Exist?**

Unfortunately, the media is responsible for many of the misconceptions that persist about people with mental disorders. Newspapers, in particular, often stress a history of mental disorder in the backgrounds of people who commit crimes of violence. Television news programs frequently sensationalize crimes where persons with mental disorders are involved.

Comedians make fun of people with mental disorders, using their disabilities as a source of humor. Also, national advertisers use stigmatizing images as promotional gimmicks to sell products.

Ironically, the media also offers our best hope for eradicating stigma because of its power to educate and influence public opinion.

### **What Is A Mental Disorder?**

A mental disorder is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances 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 seek proper treatment with a mental health professional. With the proper care and treatment, a person can recover and resume normal activities.

Many mental disorders are believed to have biological causes, just like cancer, diabetes and heart disease, but some mental disorders are caused by a person's environment and experiences.

### **Five Major Categories of Mental Disorder**

- **Anxiety Disorders**

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders. The three main types are: phobias, panic disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. People who suffer from phobias experience extreme fear or dread from a particular object or situation. Panic disorders involve 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 engaging in repetitive, ritualistic behavior such as constant hand washing.

- **Mood Disorders**

Mood disorders include depression and bipolar disorder (or manic depression) 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**

Schizophrenia is a serious disorder that 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.

- **Dementia**

This group of disorders includes diseases like Alzheimer's which leads to loss of mental functions, including memory loss and a decline in intellectual and physical skills.

- **Eating Disorders**

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia involves serious, potentially life-threatening disorders. People with these disorders have a preoccupation with food and an irrational fear of being fat. Anorexia is self-starvation while bulimia involves cycles of bingeing (consuming large quantities of food) and purging (self-inducing vomiting or abusing laxatives). Behavior may also include excessive exercise.

### **Common Misconceptions about Mental Disorder**

**Myth:** "Young people and children don't suffer from mental health problems."

**Fact:** It is estimated that more than 6 million young people in America may suffer from a mental health disorder that severely disrupts their ability to function at home, in school, or in their community.

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

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

**Myth:** "A person who has had a mental disorder can never be normal."

**Fact:** People with mental disorders can recover and resume normal activities. For example, Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes", who has clinical depression, has received treatment and today leads an enriched and accomplished life.

**Myth:** "Mentally ill persons are dangerous."

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

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

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

**How You Can Combat Stigma**

- 1 Share your experience with mental disorder. Your story can convey to others that having a mental disorder is nothing to be embarrassed about.
- 2 Help people with mental disorder reenter society. Support their efforts to obtain housing and jobs.
- 3 Respond to false statements about mental disorder or people with mental disorders. Many people have wrong and damaging ideas on the subject. Accurate facts and information may help change both their ideas and actions.

**For More Information:**

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to [www.mhacolorado.org](http://www.mhacolorado.org).

**National Mental Health Consumer Self Help Clearinghouse**  
**National Mental Health Public Awareness Campaign**

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