



Change Your Mind About Mental Health

Introduction

Mental health. It's the way your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affect your life. Good mental health leads to positive self-image and in turn, satisfying relationships with friends and others. Having good mental health helps you make good decisions and deal with life's challenges at home, work, or school.

It is not uncommon for teenagers to develop problems with their mental health. National statistics indicate that one in every five teens has some type of mental health problem in any given year. The problems range from mild to severe. Sadly, suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens.

Unfortunately, most young people with mental health problems don't get any treatment for them. Research shows that effective treatments are available that can help members of all racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

If you broke your leg or came down with pneumonia, you wouldn't let it go untreated. Often however, young people ignore mental health problems thinking they will "snap out of it," or that they are something to be ashamed of. That kind of thinking prevents people from getting the help they need. Sometimes getting help is a matter of changing your mind.

Next page: Learning From Your Peers: Carmen's Story

Learning From Your Peers: Carmen's Story

The pain and emotional discomfort that people experience when they have mental health problems are real. Fortunately, there's a good chance that an individual will improve by getting appropriate treatment. The following success stories reflect what can happen when young people with mental health problems choose to seek help.

Dealing With Panic

Carmen was 14 when she started having panic attacks. Suddenly, her heart would start racing, she couldn't catch her breath, and she felt dizzy. Experiences like eating out in a restaurant seemed to trigger an attack. Carmen began thinking about all the different situations where the attacks might happen, and she avoided those places. In many ways, fear was controlling her life.

She was reluctant at first, but Carmen eventually told her mother about her panic attacks. Carmen was surprised to learn that other family members had dealt with the same problem.

Since Carmen's mother knew something about panic attacks and their treatment, her mother convinced Carmen that she should work with a psychologist to help reduce her fear and relieve her emotional pain.

Through psychotherapy, or talk therapy, Carmen learned relaxation and other techniques for dealing with her intense anxiety. She also learned how her thoughts could influence her panic attacks.

As Carmen practiced her new skills, her attacks occurred less often, and she gradually became more comfortable in situations that had scared her so much.

Next page: Learning From Your Peers: Emily's Story

Learning From Your Peers: Emily's Story

Finding Help for Problem Eating

Early in high school, Emily began to diet occasionally and watch her weight. But by her senior year, she focused constantly on her weight and cut way back on the amount she ate. Emily exercised as much as possible. Despite her scary appearance to others, Emily believed she still needed to lose more weight.

When her family and friends expressed concern to Emily about her weight loss, she withdrew from them. Emily tried to keep her refusal to eat hidden from others. During meals with her family, Emily would move food around her plate instead of eating it.

Emily began to develop medical problems as a result of her eating behavior. During an office visit, her family physician noticed that Emily's weight had dropped and asked questions about her eating habits. The doctor helped Emily realize that her eating problems, if left untreated, eventually could threaten her life.

Emily's physician helped convince her to get the mental health treatment she needed. Through psychotherapy, Emily learned how her feelings influenced her eating. With help, she was able to improve her self-image as well as her eating habits. By getting treatment, Emily was able to stabilize her weight and regain her mental and physical health.

Next page: Learning From Your Peers: Jason's Story

Learning From Your Peers: Jason's Story

Recovering From Severe Mental Health Problems

The year he turned 19, Jason began having serious problems. He became so exhausted from severe depression, there were many days when he couldn't even get out of bed. There were times when Jason felt certain someone was out to harm him. He became very confused and frightened by his experiences, and he had thoughts of suicide.

Jason's concerned parents took him to the local mental health center. There Jason and his family began meeting with a treatment team to become educated about the problems he was having. They all worked together to develop an effective treatment plan that included psychotherapy and medication. By participating actively in Jason's treatment, his family members learned helpful ways of supporting Jason.

With good mental health treatment and the support of friends and family, Jason finally began to feel hopeful about his future. He eventually returned to school. There was a long time when Jason couldn't imagine getting any better. But he found out that even someone with severe problems like his can get help.

Next page: Triggers and Signs

Triggers and Signs

Changes in feelings such as fear and anger are a normal part of life. In fact, learning about your own mood changes, like what triggers them and when, is important to knowing who you are.

There are many situations, such as a divorce in the family or strained relationships with friends, that can cause emotional stress. Difficult situations may make you feel sad or "blue" for a while. That's different than having a mental health problem like depression. For example, young people suffering from depression often feel an overwhelming sense of helplessness and hopelessness for long periods. This depression may lead to suicidal feelings.

Certain experiences, thoughts, and feelings signal the presence of a variety of mental health problems or the need for help. The following signs are important to recognize:

- finding little or no pleasure in life
- feeling worthless or extremely guilty
- crying a lot for no particular reason
- withdrawing from other people
- experiencing severe anxiety, panic, or fear
- having big mood swings
- experiencing a change in eating or sleeping patterns
- having very low energy
- losing interest in hobbies and pleasurable activities
- having too much energy, having trouble concentrating or following through on plans
- feeling easily irritated or angry
- experiencing racing thoughts or agitation
- hearing voices or seeing images that other people do not experience
- believing that others are plotting against you
- wanting to harm yourself or someone else.

It's not necessarily easy to spot these signs, or to figure out what they mean. Qualified mental health professionals are skilled in making an accurate diagnosis.

As a general rule: the longer the signs last, the more serious they are; and the more they interfere with daily life, the greater the chance that professional treatment is needed.

Next page: Help How-Tos: First Step, Reach Out to People You Trust

Help How-Tos: First Step, Reach Out to People You Trust

Sometimes people don't get the help they need because they don't know where to turn. When you're not feeling well, it can be a struggle to take the necessary steps to help yourself get better.

When dealing with mental health or emotional problems, it's important not to go at it alone. Healing is a combination of helping yourself and letting others help you. Comfort and support, information and advice, and professional treatment are all forms of help.

Think of all the people you can turn to for support. These are people who are concerned about you and can help comfort you, who will listen to you and encourage you, and who can help arrange for treatment. In other words, find the caring people in your life who can help you.

These people might include:

- friends
- parents and other family members
- someone who seems "like a parent" to you
- other adults whose advice you would value -- perhaps a favorite teacher or coach, a member of your church or other place of worship, or a good friend's parent.

Research shows that males are more reluctant to look for help and receive it than females are. While some people may have difficulty reaching out to others they trust, taking this first step in getting help is important for everyone to do.

Some families have health insurance that helps them get the services they need from mental health professionals. Insurance may cover some of the cost of these services. Many insurance companies provide a list of licensed mental health professionals in your area.

Next page: Help How-Tos: Team Mental Health

Help How-Tos: Take Action

The more you know, the easier it is

Libraries are an excellent source of information about mental health. Bookstores often have "self-help" or "psychology" sections.

For those with Internet access, there are many Web sites related to health and mental health. Some are better in quality than others. It is important to know if the information on a site comes from sources you can trust. Use caution whenever you're sharing or exchanging information online: there's a chance that it will not be kept private.

Nothing is worse than nothing

The consequences of not getting help for mental health problems can be serious. Untreated problems often continue and become worse, and new problems may occur. For example, someone with panic attacks might begin drinking too much alcohol with the mistaken hope that it will help relieve his or her emotional pain.

One final word: to be a good friend, never keep talk of suicide a secret

Friends often confide in one another about their problems. But if a friend mentions suicide, take it seriously and seek help immediately from a trusted adult or health professional. Never keep talk of suicide a secret, even if a friend asks you to. It's better to risk losing a friendship than to risk losing a friend forever.

Next page: It's All In the Attitude

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There are many reasons why people do not get help for mental health problems. Fear, shame, and embarrassment often prevent individuals and their families from doing anything.

Sometimes being able to get the help, support, and professional treatment you need is a matter of changing your mind about mental health and changing the way you react to mental health problems.

Here are some important reminders:

- Mental health is as important as physical health. In fact, the two are closely linked.
- Mental health problems are real, and they deserve to be treated.
- It's not a person's fault if he or she has a mental health problem. No one is to blame.
- Mental health problems are not a sign of weakness. They are not something you can "just snap out of" even if you try.
- Whether you're male or female, it's OK to ask for help and get it.
- There's hope. People improve and recover with the help of treatment, and they are able to enjoy happier and healthier lives.