

Myths, facts about mental illness, which hits 1 in 4 Americans

Misconceptions about mental illness are pervasive, and the lack of understanding can have serious consequences for millions of people.

In fact, one in four Americans suffers from a diagnosable mental illness in a given year. They are our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, children and friends. They are us. Yet, evidence indicates that only one-third of those in need of treatment seek care, mostly because of stigma.



My Turn

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Four of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide are mental disorders. And, among developed nations, including the United States, major depression is the leading cause of disability. The direct cost of mental-

health services, which includes spending for treatment and rehabilitation, is about \$69 billion in the United States, according to the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression.

This is a timely topic to discuss, since May is Mental Health Awareness Month.

So what are some of the myths about mental illness that create stigma? The alliance surveyed mental-health professionals nationwide to determine the most common myths, and here are some they identified:

Myth: Psychiatric disorders are not true medical illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes. People who have a mental illness are just "crazy."

Fact: Brain disorders are legitimate medical illnesses. Research shows there are genetic and biological causes for psychiatric disorders, and they can be treated effectively.

Myth: People with a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, are dangerous and violent.

Fact: Setting aside Hollywood portrayals, the statistics show that the incidence of violence in people who have a brain disorder is indistinguishable from the general population. Those suffering from a psychosis, such as schizophrenia, are more often frightened, confused and despairing rather than violent.

Myth: Depression results from a personality weakness or character flaw, and people who are depressed could just snap out of it if they tried hard enough.

Fact: Depression has nothing to do with being lazy or weak. It results from changes in brain chemistry or brain function, and medication and/or psychotherapy often help people to recover.

Myth: Schizophrenia means split

personality, and there is no way to control it.

Fact: Schizophrenia is often confused with multiple-personality disorder. Actually, schizophrenia is a brain disorder that includes symptoms ranging from social withdrawal to hallucinations. Many of the estimated 2.5 million Americans with schizophrenia lead fulfilling, productive lives with jobs, friends and family.

Myth: If you have a mental illness, you can will it away. Being treated for a psychiatric disorder means an individual has in some way "failed" or is weak.

Fact: A serious mental illness cannot be willed away. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away, either. It takes courage to seek professional help, and treatment works.

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