



## **Mental Health America of Franklin County**

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# **General Mental Health Issues: Stigma**

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## **Building Awareness and Understanding About Mental Illness**

Mental illness can strike anyone! It knows no age limits, economic status, race, creed or color. During the course of a year, more than 48 million Americans are affected by one or more mental disorders. Medical science has made incredible progress over the last century in understanding, curing and eliminating the causes of many diseases including mental illnesses. 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 illnesses 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. Unfortunately, because people with mental illnesses often suffer from symptoms, which are behavioral, they are sometimes thought of differently than people with physical ailments. Instead of receiving compassion and support, people with mental illnesses may be greeted by unsympathetic, unfair or hostile responses.

Most of the intolerance can be attributed to the stigma that accompanies mental illness. As a society, we often perceive people who have a mental illness as strange, scary, and even dangerous. These misconceptions frequently result in blatant discrimination. In fact, when people with mental illnesses are asked to identify the biggest problem they face, most say it is simply lack of acceptance.

*People who suffer or have suffered from mental illness have many obstacles to overcome. Don't let your attitude or actions be yet another hurdle!*

## **Did You Know?**

Abraham Lincoln fought depression for many years. After overcoming his illness, he went on to become President of the United States!

Others who have conquered their mental illness are Dick Clark; Ted Turner; Alma Powell, wife of Colin Powell; Mike Wallace, of 60 Minute; Joan Rivers, comedienne; Art Buchwald, humorist-columnist; Dick Cavett, TV talk show host; Kitty Dukakis, wife of Michael Dukakis; and Patty Duke, actress.

The best way to dispel misconceptions and eliminate discrimination about mental illness is to get a clear understanding of how it affects people.

## **What Is A Mental Illness?**

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thinking, perception and behavior, which may significantly impair the person's ability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. Many mental illnesses are believed to have biological causes, just like cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Depending on the type and severity of the mental illness, with the proper care and treatment, a person can learn to cope, improve, or experience a full recovery.

## **The Five Major Categories Of Mental Illness:**

### ***Anxiety Disorders***

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses. 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, which involves extreme 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 the most disabling and serious of the mental illnesses. Schizophrenia is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain that cause a variety of symptoms including hallucinations, delusions, withdrawal, incoherent speech and impaired reasoning.

### ***Dementias***

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

### ***Eating Disorders***

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

## **Common Misconceptions About Mental Illness**

**Myth:** *"Mental illnesses are not real diseases like heart disease and cancer."*

**Fact:** While many psychiatric disorders cannot be detected through simple blood tests or biopsies, these diseases have been linked in studies to a biological origin. Some psychotic disorders may be situational and temporary, caused by extreme stress or life changes such as a death of a loved one or a divorce.

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

**Fact:** The notion that all people with mental illnesses should be institutionalized is a thing of the past. Today, there are a variety of care providers, programs and medications that allow most patients to lead productive lives within their communities.

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

**Fact:** Mental illness is often a temporary condition. A previously well-adjusted individual may have an episode of illness lasting weeks or months, and then may go for years, even a lifetime, without further difficulty. To label such a recovered patient "abnormal" is both unfair and unrealistic.

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

**Fact:** The vast majority of people with mental illnesses *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:** *"Recovered mental patients can work low-level jobs but aren't suited for really important or responsible positions."*

**Fact:** Like everyone else, people with mental illnesses are individuals. Career potential depends on a person's particular talents, abilities, intelligence, experience and motivation as well as his/her current state of physical and mental health.

## **Why Stigma Still Exists**

Unfortunately, the media are responsible for many of the attitudes and misconceptions we hold regarding people with mental illnesses. As a society, we are bombarded with images of people with mental illnesses as being homicidal madmen, women with 16 personalities, or homeless people talking to themselves. Newspapers, in particular, often stress a history of mental illness in the backgrounds of people who commit crimes of violence. Television news programs frequently sensationalize crimes where persons with mental illness are involved. Comedians make fun of people with mental illnesses, using their disabilities as a source of humor. Furthermore, national advertisers present stigmatizing images as promotional gimmicks to sell products.

Ironically, the media also offer the best hope for eradicating stigma because of their power to educate and influence public opinion. Objectively, the media have a responsibility to provide a broader perspective on people with mental illnesses.

## **How You Can Help:**

- Be positive and helpful. Respond to people who have a mental illness as individuals. Learn about the person and deal with them on the basis of your knowledge, not your assumptions.
- Do what you can to help people with a mental illness reenter society. Support their efforts to obtain housing and jobs.
- Don't let false statements about mental illness or people with mental illnesses go unchallenged. Many people have wrong and damaging ideas on the subject, but honestly believe that their views are accurate. Correct information may help them change both their ideas and actions.

Spread the word. Tell others what you have learned. Help give people recovering from a mental illness what they need most, **a chance**

**Mental Health America of Franklin County** is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at [www.mhafc.org](http://www.mhafc.org).