Take charge of your mental health: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist

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Mental illness can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, race, or income. Each year, roughly one in four Americans will be affected by some form of mental illness. When treated, rates of recovery are high. However, fewer than half of those with diagnosable mental illnesses will seek treatment.

A diagnosis of mental illness goes beyond merely having an off-day or feeling sad or anxious from time to time. Mental illnesses represent a pattern of behavior and often cause major life disruptions. People affected have illnesses that are just as real as any medical illness; and just like medical illness, mental illness cannot be overcome through will power alone.

Instead, people affected by mental illness need to be evaluated and treated by professionals. Many safe and effective treatments exist today, and rates of recovery are high with treatment.

Myths and facts about mental illness
Many myths surround mental illness. Here are four facts to keep in mind:

1) **Fact:** Mental illnesses are common.

   Each year, roughly 57 million Americans will be affected by one or more mental illnesses. Of these:

   - Roughly 40 million will suffer from some type of anxiety disorder, such as panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, or social phobia.
   - Roughly 18 million will suffer from some form of depression.
   - Roughly 2.6 million will suffer from bipolar disorder.
   - Roughly 2.4 million will suffer from schizophrenia.

2) **Fact:** Many people with mental illness recover and lead full lives.

   More safe and effective treatments exist today than ever before. As a result, studies have shown that many people with mental illness recover to lead productive and active professional and social lives.

   In fact, rates of successful treatment for mental illnesses are often as high as or even higher than for common medical conditions, such as heart disease. For example:

   - Panic disorder has a successful treatment rate of 70 to 90 percent.
   - Depression has a successful treatment rate of over 80 percent.
   - Schizophrenia has a successful treatment rate of roughly 60 percent.
   - Heart disease has a successful treatment rate of 45 to 50 percent.

3) **Fact:** Mental illness is not a character weakness.

   Mental illnesses are not a character weakness. They are the result of biological, psychological, and social factors. People with mental illness do not need to just "pull themselves together." If they could do so easily, a formal diagnosis of a mental illness would be less likely.

   Because mental illness will not go away through sheer willpower or by ignoring the problem, professional treatment is often needed to address the condition.

4) **Fact:** Children can have mental illness.
Some people believe that children do not suffer from mental illness. But in reality, children can be affected. In fact, in any given year, 5 to 9 percent of children have a mental illness.

In addition, mental illness in adults often begins in childhood or adolescence. This is vital to remember because recognizing and treating mental health problems early leads to better outcomes.

**Getting Help for Mental Illness**

If you are affected by a mental illness or think that you may be, it is important that you see a professional for evaluation and treatment. One good place to start is with your primary care physician. These doctors have training in diagnosing and treating common mental illnesses in their patients. If a condition is beyond their expertise, they can make a referral to someone with more training in mental health.

Remember that great hope exists for the recovery of those who are affected.

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