Dear Alice,

What are some signs of mental illness? I know that this is a pretty general question, but I need all the info you can give me.

? Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

Mental illness is typically defined as a medical condition that significantly disrupts an individual's thinking, mood, relationships with others, and/or daily functioning. The severity of any sign or symptom of mental illness can vary quite a bit between people. Individuals may feel their symptoms rise and fall depending on various factors, like stressors, for example. Furthermore, mental and physical health goes hand-in-hand. In other words, signs and symptoms of mental and physical health can affect one another. While certain symptoms of medical conditions and mental illness may be used in diagnosis, try to also remember that simply the presence of symptoms does not equal a diagnosis - it's a good idea to leave that to a mental health professional.

It's hard to encapsulate one list of signs for every mental illness, because every mental illness can be quite different. Here are some of the most common mental illnesses and a very brief list of some of their symptoms:

- **Major depression.** Major depressive disorder often includes feelings of extreme sadness, hopelessness, lethargy and sometimes suicidal thoughts that last more than two weeks. You can check out Friend is depressed ? how to help? for more in-depth information on depression.

- **Schizophrenia.** Schizophrenia is classified by the inability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions, and relate to others. There is more detailed information for readers curious about schizophrenia in Do I have schizophrenia? and Schizophrenia ? Are genes involved?.

- **Bipolar disorder.** Symptoms of bipolar disorder can include recurring episodes of mania and depression. Episodes of mania and depression can last from one day to several months. Mania is typically characterized by feelings of extreme irritability and/or
euphoria along with symptoms such as agitation, increased energy, or increased risk-taking behavior. You can read about more specific information on bipolar disorder in Bipolar disorder: Am I at risk? [5].

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).** OCD symptoms include persistent intrusive, illogical thoughts, unwanted ideas, or irrational impulses that interfere with an individual’s life and last for at least an hour a day. A detailed look at the prevalence and medical understanding of OCD is explained in I think I have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) [6].

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** PTSD is characterized by recurrent nightmares or flashbacks, insomnia, exaggerated physical reactions to triggers that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event, avoidance of activities, places or people that remind the person of the trauma, and feelings of detachment or estrangement from others. Post-active duty ? Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? [7] shares some advice for helping a loved one cope with PTSD.

- **Borderline personality disorder (BPD).** Often people who suffer from borderline personality disorder experience emotional dysregulation that is characterized by persistent instability in moods, interpersonal relationships, self-image, and behavior. Information on borderline personality disorder symptoms and helpful resources are shared in Borderline personality disorder [8].

- **Attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).** ADD and ADHD are generally defined by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. A more in-depth discussion of symptoms of ADD and ADHD is available in What is attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)? [9].

- **Eating disorders.** Disordered eating can be strategy for coping with severe stress and anxiety through self-destructive attitudes and behaviors associated with food and eating. There are different types of eating disorders and resources reviewed in Eating disorders vs. normal eating [10].

- **Anxiety disorders.** Anxiety disorders are typically described as periods or instances of extreme anxiety, sometimes coupled with panic attacks that can be overwhelming and terrifying. Additional information on anxiety and symptoms of anxiety disorders is discussed in Help for agoraphobia [11] and Panic attacks [12].

Mental illness also impacts the lives of more than 60 million Americans, regardless of age, race, religion, or income. While these facts can describe mental illness on a general level, the various types of mental illness and diagnoses can have very different signs and symptoms. The National Alliance on Mental Illness’s list of common illnesses [13] or the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health archives [14] can lend even more information on specific and general mental health information. Mental health resources in your area may also be a great way to ask more questions in person.

The Mental Health America website [15] has resources on finding therapy resources near you. A common misconception is that you need to be in crisis to talk to a counselor ? instead counselors can be great sources of information that can help you learn more about yourself and about others in your life.
Hope this helps!

Alice!
Category: Emotional Health
Blues & Depression
Obsessive & Compulsive Behavior
Stress & Anxiety

Related questions

Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) Mental Health Service (CUMC)
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