

Issues of Mental Illness in Families

THE FACTS

- An estimated one in five adults in the United States suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year.

National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov.

- The vast majority of people with a mental illness are not dangerous.
- Mental illness is treatable with various combinations of therapy and drugs.

DEFINITION

Definitions of mental illness have changed over time, across cultures, and across national—and even state—boundaries. Mental illness is diagnosed based on the nature and severity of an individual's symptoms. If a person meets the diagnostic criteria as set forth in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), currently in its fourth edition, he/she may be diagnosed with a particular disorder such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, alcohol dependence, and so on. The term “dual diagnosis” indicates that an individual has both a psychiatric disorder and a substance abuse problem.

CAUSES

No single model or perspective accounts for all instances of mental illness. Some disorders have a predominately biological or neurological basis; others seem to be related to life experiences, trauma, or difficulties in communication. The most helpful stance for you to take in your CASA volunteer work is to accept that mental illness affects the whole person—mentally, physically, psychologically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN & FAMILIES

The biggest obstacle facing those suffering from mental illness is the lack of appropriate, effective treatment. This lack may result from misunderstanding the need for treatment or being afraid to seek it due to the stigma associated with mental illness in US culture. It may also result from a lack of access to treatment. There may not be treatment available in a person's community, or the person may not be able to pay for it.

Untreated mental illness can lead to isolation and despair for individuals and families. Some parents may be so incapacitated by anxiety or depression that they are unable to care for their children. Or some may have hallucinations or delusions, which make them a danger to themselves, or their children.

It is critical for you as a CASA volunteer to focus less on a parent's diagnosis and more on his/her ability to provide a safe home for the child. The degree to which a parent's

functioning is impaired will vary from mild to severe. It is important to note that with medication and/or therapy most people with mental illness can function normally.

To understand the impact of mental illness in a particular family, it is critical that you also examine the parents' level of functioning. A person's level of functioning can be affected by many factors, and not all are related to mental illness. It is important to distinguish between mental illness and other kinds of limitations. For example, many adults have limited intellectual abilities or specific learning disabilities. These limitations range in severity. By looking at the parents' level of functioning in addition to mental illness, you can make recommendations that address the likelihood that the parents can remedy the problems that initiated their involvement with the child protective services system.

TREATMENT

Availability of mental health treatment varies, and its effectiveness depends on a variety of factors. A well-designed treatment plan takes individual differences into account. Healers and practices from a person's cultural tradition (e.g., the use of prayer or meditation) can be included with other, more "Western," approaches, which might include specialized inpatient treatment (e.g., for substance abuse), medication, individual and/or group counseling, self-help groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and other 12-step programs), and education or training (e.g., parenting classes or anger management training).

WHAT CAN A CASA VOLUNTEER DO?

It is not your task to diagnose mental illness. However, it is important to be aware of warning signs or indicators that may affect the health or safety of the child so that you can alert the child protective services caseworker about your concerns. How will you know mental illness when you see it? Your internal cues are your best initial indicators that something is "off" or "not right" about a person.

Following are some indicators that may point to the need for professional assessment:

- **Social Withdrawal**

Characterized by "sitting and doing nothing"; friendlessness (including abnormal self-centeredness or preoccupation with self); dropping out of activities; decline in academic, vocational, or athletic performance

- **Depression**

Includes loss of interest in once pleasurable activities; expressions of hopelessness or apathy; excessive fatigue and sleepiness, or inability to sleep; changes in appetite and motivation; pessimism; thinking or talking about suicide; a growing inability to cope with problems and daily activities

- **Thought Disorders**

Evidenced by confused thinking; strange or grandiose ideas; an inability to concentrate or cope with minor problems; irrational statements; peculiar use of words; excessive fears or suspicions

- **Expression of Feelings Disproportionate to Circumstances**

May include indifference even in important situations; inability to cry or excessive crying; inability to express joy; inappropriate laughter; anger and hostility out of proportion to the precipitating event

- **Behavior Changes**

Such as hyperactivity, inactivity, or alternating between the two; deterioration in personal hygiene; noticeable and rapid weight loss; changes in personality; drug or alcohol abuse; forgetfulness and loss of valuable possessions; bizarre behavior (such as skipping, staring, or strange posturing); increased absenteeism from work/school

As part of the assessment, it is important to determine if domestic violence and/or substance abuse are contributing or causal factors. This is a task for professionals.

In your capacity as a CASA volunteer:

- You can recommend a mental health assessment of a parent or child.
- You may request consultations with a parent's or a child's mental health care providers. Although the parent's mental health providers are ethically and legally required to maintain their client's confidentiality, they may be willing — with their client's permission — to talk with you about their perspective on the situation and any concerns you have. Your CASA volunteer supervisor will be able to answer your questions about gaining access to this confidential information.
- When you encounter resistance to a label, diagnosis, or treatment, you can become aware of ethnic and cultural considerations. The standards for research and definitions of health, illness, and treatment have historically derived from a white, middle-class perspective.

For more information on specific mental illnesses, check out the National Institute of Mental Health website at www.nimh.nih.gov.

Local Resources

Klamath County Mental Health
882-7291

Lutheran Community Services
883-3471

Klamath Youth Development Center
883-1030

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

NAMI Klamath
885-4909

Veterans Office
1-800-809-8725