Deconstructing Myths About Mental Health

Myths and misinformation about mental illness can lead to stigma that keeps people from seeking insight and support regarding their mental health. The biggest truth is that no one needs to suffer the debilitating effects of mental illness. Help and happiness are possible—no matter how dark the clouds seem.

March 1, 2011 By David Evans

Myth: Psychological disorders are different from other medical problems.
Truth: The experts are still arguing nature versus nurture, but most concede there's a genetic and biological root for many psychological disorders. Environment, upbringing and life circumstances are linked to mental illness, but these same factors also strongly predict whether a person will develop cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other conditions.

Myth: Having a psychological disorder means I'm weak.
Truth: Not necessarily. People with mental disorders often display remarkable courage and strength—maintaining jobs and raising families despite crushing anxiety, depression and other cerebral challenges. It takes courage to admit you're suffering from a problem that carries such stigma. In fact, people who seek to overcome their mental illness are quite strong and brave.

Myth: If I have a mental illness, I won't be able to pursue my career or other goals.
Truth: If you've been successfully treated, and you respect your limitations, you should be able to accomplish almost anything you want to—provided you have the motivation and persistence to work hard and persevere.

Myth: There are no effective treatments for mental illness.
Truth: This couldn't be further from the truth. Depending on the disorder, between 70 and 90 percent of people will see reduced symptoms and improved quality of life when they receive appropriate and effective treatment for mental health issues.

Myth: If I take antidepressants I'll feel like an emotional zombie.
Truth: Not all meds are alike. Some people do feel less alert and clear-headed on some medications, but most of the time this is not the case. Sometimes you have to try different drugs to find the one that works best with the fewest side effects.

Myth: If I take meds I'll lose my ability to function sexually.
Truth: Studies show that most people don't have this problem. However, some meds are more prone to cause this side effect than others. Your doctor should take your concerns about your sexual performance seriously and help you find a medication that doesn't impede your sexual life. Ask your doctor if drugs like Viagra and Cialis can help you.

Myth: If I just do enough exercise or yoga, get enough sun or eat the right diet, my psychological problems will disappear.
Truth: These things can help you recover from mood and anxiety disorders, but they often aren't enough—by themselves—to pull someone out of a serious depression, resolve problems with panic or compulsive behavior, or keep someone with bipolar disorder from having a manic or depressive episode.

Myth: If I tell people I have a psychological disorder, they will treat me differently—or even reject me.
Truth: Probably not as many as you think. There's no way around it—mental illness carries a huge stigma, but that's changing fast as more people "come out" about their struggles. The truth is some people, whether from ignorance or prejudice, will treat you differently or reject you if you tell them what you're going through. The trick is knowing whom to tell and when to tell them.

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