Serious Signs of Trouble

How to know if—and when—it's time to seek professional help for mental health issues.

March 1, 2011 By Tim Horn

You always wake up at 3 a.m., but you're tired all the time. Your favorite television program seems pointless now. You bit your best friend's head off for the second time in two weeks over a misunderstanding. You haven't even started a report at work that's due in two days. Are you just really stressed out, or are these things signs of a bigger problem?

The answer, though perhaps not very satisfying, is that it depends. If all this has been occurring under the cloud of an impending divorce, for example, then your reaction to stress may be relatively normal. Having a trusted person you can talk to will probably help you weather this kind of emotional storm. You can also take steps to help manage the stress—try meditation or give up caffeine for a while—and you'll probably be OK once the stressful situation resolves.

If, however, everything else is going swimmingly in your life, but you still feel like a dead person reanimated into a living body, then turning to a professional for help is probably a good idea.

Psychology isn't as exact a science as biology or chemistry—at least not yet—but there are clusters of symptoms that commonly point to certain psychological problems.

To help determine whether you might be dealing with a mental health issue, consider the questions a professional might ask you:

- Has your sleep, appetite or energy level changed?
- Are you feeling unusually guilty and down on yourself—or on the flip side, overly confident and exuberant?
- Are you more irritable and impatient?
- Are you thinking about painful memories over and over again?
- Has your drinking or drug use increased?
- Do you feel persistent anxiety, or find yourself panicking when you are not actually in danger?

Remember, each mental health disorder has specific symptoms. In fact, psychological disorders

are diagnosed based on the number, severity and persistence of specific symptoms. A diagnosis should come from a trained mental health professional, not from yourself, your spouse or your mother-in-law.

Understand that if you do seek help, you won't be forced to do anything against your will—unless you are an immediate danger to yourself or someone else. Most providers will recommend counseling, medication and/or lifestyle changes.

One vital point: If you have thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, it is critical to seek professional help right away. To speak with a trained crisis counselor, call 1.800.SUICIDE (1.800.784.2433) or 1.800.273.TALK (1.800.273.8255).

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