Mental Health Myths

Myths and misinformation about mental illness lead to stigma and can keep people from seeking proper care for themselves or their loved ones. Mental illness doesn't have to keep anyone down, however. Here, we debunk some of the most common mental health myths so you can get on the path to health and recovery.

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 also often linked to mental illness, but these environmental factors also strongly predict whether a person will develop cardiovascular disease, diabetes and many other medical conditions.

Myth: Having a psychological disorder means I'm weak.
Truth: Au contraire. 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. People who seek to overcome their mental illness are quite strong and brave.

Myth: If I'm "crazy" today, I'll always be crazy.
Truth: First of all, "crazy" is a meaningless term—psychological disorders run the gamut from distress to psychosis, and only a minority of cases lead to hospitalization. Some people with milder depression and anxiety never have a recurrence after successful treatment. However, dealing with major depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia—among other conditions—can be lifelong struggles.

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 just about anything you set your mind 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 vital and alive 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 sexual performance seriously and help find a medication that doesn't impede your sexual life.

Myth: If I go to therapy I'll have to spend years dwelling on my childhood.
Truth: It depends on the type of therapy. While issues related to your upbringing might be addressed if they are relevant to current problems, they are not the central focus for many types of therapy. Cognitive therapy, for example, focuses on modifying your current thinking and behavior.

Myth: If I just do enough exercise or yoga, get enough sun or eat the right diet, my psychological problems will disappear.
Truth: All of these things can aid in recovery 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 from having a manic episode.

Myth: If I have a mental illness, I can't be a good parent.
Truth: You might sometimes need more of a helping hand than the average person when raising children, but having a psychological disorder won't necessarily keep you from providing a safe, stable and loving environment for your kids.

Myth: Mental illness is caused by bad parenting.
Truth: It is nearly impossible to get a consensus on what constitutes "bad parenting." Upbringing does matter, and abuse, neglect and exposure to violence do increase the risk of developing a psychological disorder later in life. But even these factors don't guarantee that a person will develop a serious mental health problem.

Myth: Children don't suffer from serious psychological disorders.
Truth: Yes they do. But it's often more challenging to define, diagnose and treat mental illness in children. This is partly due to the fact that many psychological disorders manifest differently in children than in adults.

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 and more people "come out" about their struggles. The truth is that 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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