In the past, the subject of mental illness was surrounded with mystery and fear. Today, we have made tremendous progress in our understanding and, especially, in our ability to offer effective treatments. However, questions about mental illness often go unanswered and stand in the way of people receiving help.

How Common Is Mental Illness, and What Are the Impacts on Society?

Mental illness is common, and the milder conditions are very common. One fifth of Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder during any given year. One fifth of school-age children are also affected by these conditions. Severe and persistent mental illness is less common, but still affects 3 percent of the population.

The vast majority of individuals with mental disorders continue to function in their daily lives, although with varying impairments. Overall medical care costs are driven up enormously by costs associated with unrecognized psychiatric syndromes.

What Are the Causes of Mental Illness?

The exact causes of mental disorders are unknown, but an explosive growth of research has brought us closer to the answers. We can say that certain inherited dispositions interact with triggering environmental factors. Poverty and stress are well-known to be bad for your health—this is true for mental health as for physical health. In fact, the distinction between “mental” illness and “physical” illness can be misleading. Like physical illnesses, mental disorders can have a biological nature. Many physical illnesses can also have a strong emotional component.

Are Mentally Ill Persons Violent?

There is a misconception that mentally ill persons are violent, which contributes to the stigma of mental illness. The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent, and the majority of violent acts are conducted by persons who are not mentally ill. Mentally ill persons are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators, and more likely to hurt themselves than hurt other people.

How Difficult Is It to Get an Appointment with a Psychiatrist?

It is always wise to begin a search for help by asking the family doctor for advice; in addition, local hospitals often can make a referral and teaching hospitals or large medical centers are especially likely to be aware of available resources. A variety of reputable organizations have lists of service providers, and good low-cost or sliding-scale treatment programs exist in many communities.

Many of the problems Americans face in obtaining good mental health services are similar to the problems in obtaining general medical services. Moreover, 40 million Americans have no insurance at all. Advocacy organizations, professional societies, patients' rights groups, and the public at large have been taking action to make treatment for mental illness more accessible and affordable.

Today's model of psychiatric care recognizes the importance of families as part of the treatment team. Enlightened interventions which help families struggling with child abuse and neglect, domestic and community violence, substance abuse, or school failure increasingly integrate psychiatric consultation into their programs. Any or all of these interventions may be used in tailoring a treatment plan for patients.
One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigmas associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.

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