

Does Someone You Know Have A Mental Illness

By Dr. George Rubin

Sometimes people do not want to believe that they or someone in their family has a mental illness often because they are afraid that it will affect their family's good name. But this can mean that a mentally ill person does not get the treatment he or she needs. Just imagine if someone in the family had symptoms of a physical disease. Would relatives watch that person get sicker and sicker without calling a doctor? Of course not.

Mental illness is nothing to be afraid of. Like physical illness, it is treatable. Treatments include medication, counselling and stress management, for example. Sometimes a person may need to stay in hospital for a while. But besides treatment there is something else that will help too – a change of community attitude. People with mental illness need our support and acceptance. Without that acceptance, many mentally ill people and their families try to hide the illness from their community. This can make families feel very isolated and can make the illness worse.

The first step towards changing attitudes is to understand mental illness better. Just like physical illness, mental illness (which affects one person out of five at some time in their life) includes many different problems. Some of them, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, can be very serious, while other more common problems such as anxiety and phobias are less serious.

Some community prejudice comes from the idea that mental illness is closely linked to violence, but people who are mentally ill are no more violent than other people. Another idea is that mental illness is caused by a personality weakness but this is not true either. Mental illness is not anyone's fault just like diabetes is not anyone's fault. Nor is it true that mentally ill people are sexually disturbed; most sexual offenders are not mentally ill.

We can help to change community attitudes by:

- Learning to see mental illness like any other health problem and accept that if a person acts strangely it may be a symptom of mental illness, just as a cough can be a symptom of the flu. Try to learn more about the illness so you can understand why the person behaves strangely.
- Showing friendship and support to friends, relatives, neighbours or colleagues at work who are affected by mental illness and encouraging other people to do the same.
- Encouraging people who are mentally ill, or their families, to seek help.

The material in this brochure has been adapted from documents produced by NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service.
This brochure can be reproduced as required.