

# HEALTH MATTERS

## Mental Illness – What is it? Do I have it? Can I Beat It?

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For many, the term “mental illness” elicits feelings of shame, avoidance, and disgust. For others, the diagnosis of a mental illness is liberating because it finally creates an explanation, however subjective it might be, to why we don’t always feel “normal”. According to the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition, the term “mental illness” or “mental disorder” was initially created in order to categorize and classify people on a national census. It has grown from that humble beginning into a way we describe what is happening within our lives and within ourselves. “A common misconception is that a classification of mental disorders classifies people. When actually what are being classified are disorders that people have” (American Psychiatric Association, p. xxxi). Mental illnesses are not meant to be stigmatizing or definitive of the members of our society, they are merely in place to organize the disorders themselves. In short, a mental illness is subjectively defined as an illness that affects the mind instead of the body. It is characteristic of Western culture to identify the emotional (or mental) aspects of a disorder and give them precedence over the physical aspects of a disorder (Kleinman, 1996). However, if you have a mental illness, or know someone who does, you will recognize that a mental illness impacts not only our mind, but our body, social life, family, and the community.

Perhaps one of the most prevalent mental disorders in the United States is Depression. In various community studies, the prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder in adults is 5-9% in women and 2-3% in men. The occurrence of mental illness seems to be unrelated to ethnicity, education, income, or marital status (American Psychiatric Association, p. 372), but it does seem to be more common in women than in men. Generally, symptoms of depression include: sad or irritable mood and a loss of interest or pleasure. Depression can be overly diagnosed because the symptoms of depression are very common; however, just because the symptoms are present, a diagnosis is not necessarily imminent.

Another common mental disorder within our society is Anxiety. This disorder takes on many forms, whether it is short- or long-term, generic or specific, intense or routine. Overall, anxiety is an excessive and uncontrollable worry, sometimes leading to panic attacks. Because anxiety can present in many different ways, it can also be over-generalized in our society and many people may feel they have a disorder because they have anxious symptoms.

How do we determine if these symptoms add up to a disorder? Generally speaking, the primary thing to consider if we are trying to determine if we have a mental illness is: Does it create an impairment or distress in our everyday lives? If it is impacting our social life, family life, or work life in such a way that it is creating an extreme discomfort or inability to function properly, then we could be experiencing a mental illness.

If I have it, or if I think I have it, what do I do about it? There are several things to keep in mind: First, be willing to ask for help. Our community has resources in place so we *can* get the help we need to feel better again. Second, recognize that change is

possible. Just because you have a diagnosis of a mental illness, that doesn't put you into a category of "helpless" or "stuck". Each of us is inherently resilient and capable of change. Don't let the diagnosis of a mental illness create a culture of shame in your life; let it be a valid explanation for why you may not feel "normal" all the time. Keep in mind that mental illness is subjective and socially-based. These diagnoses are not meant to define us, they are meant to move us forward. The prevalence of some mental illnesses is brought about simply by our attention to them; focusing on the strengths within our lives instead of the deficits might make us feel "normal" again.

For more information about town-funded mental health resources available to Needham residents, go to [www.riversidecc.org](http://www.riversidecc.org). Another website that can help with finding local services is <http://msppinterface.org/>. For more general information about living with mental illness, check out [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org) or [www.mentalhealth.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.gov).