

The Invisible Illness

Many health conditions and the characteristics that define them are evident, either because they are physically visible or because they can be verified through biopsies, scans, or other medical testing. Some illnesses, however, aren't as easily observable by others, particularly those related to mental health. And, unfortunately, we tend to better comprehend what we can see, which often leads to those who suffer from mental illness being misunderstood, judged, or the object of skepticism. With millions of people in the U.S. affected by mental illness each year, it's imperative to break the stigma. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to reveal the facts, help you see what it really means to live with mental illness, and offer advice for seeking support.

A broad umbrella

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) describes mental illness as *"a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior, or mood."* Having a mental illness is more common than you might think, as people are often afraid or unwilling to talk about it, and they may not believe it themselves. From anxiety to depression or bipolar disorder, from schizophrenia to personality disorders, a mental illness can manifest in different ways. It's possible for there to be no clear symptoms, and any particular symptom does not necessarily indicate a mental illness. That said, some of the more severe markers may include:

- Intense mood changes, including feelings of euphoria or overwhelming "highs"
- Suicidal thoughts
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Excessive worry or fear
- Delusions or hallucinations
- Inability to recognize changes in one's own personality, feelings, or behavior
- Disjointed thoughts, difficulty concentrating, or relating to others
- Persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest
- Unexplained headaches, upset stomach, and other ambiguous pains
- Difficulty performing daily activities
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Fatigue
- Pronounced irritability or anger
- Avoidance of social activities and friends

1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.

43.3% of U.S. adults with mental illness received treatment in 2018
National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019

Mental illness day-to-day

Living with a mental illness is challenging on many levels. It can be isolating, exhausting, and debilitating. You feel trapped, hopeless, and as though no one understands what you're going through. Life seems difficult and you may experience an inability to carry out everyday tasks such as making a meal or getting dressed. Not being able to perform tasks essential to daily living is often a very clear sign that it's time to reach out for help. At the same time, part of the illness may be an unwillingness to ask for help.

Offering help and seeking support

Know when to help. Do your best to be aware of the signs and symptoms and changes in your own, or another's, behavior. It may be useful to do some advance planning on how to recognize when help is needed, and how to get that help.

Educate yourself. Gain a better understanding of mental health by reading about it or consulting reputable sources like NAMI or mentalhealth.gov. It's important to understand that treatment helps, and that there are professionals who are trained to work with individuals who are dealing with mental health issues.

You're not alone. Remember that mental illness is often misunderstood and can be a lonely existence for those who suffer from it. Social support is crucial to recovery. Reach out for support for yourself or be that source of encouragement and validation for your loved one and let them know that they won't go through this alone.

Seek support. Get help from friends, peers, support group members, and professionals like an EAP counselor. Talking with others who know what you're going through is vital for you, as well as for your loved one.

If you or someone you care for suffers with mental illness, your EAP is here to help. Consultants are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide you with additional information, resources, and guidance. Call or go online any time, day or night.

The Employee Assistance Program is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to federal employees at no cost.

24 HOURS A DAY

800-222-0364

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