

Recognizing the Warning Signs of Mental Illness

Despite the research and improvements that have been made in mental health over the past few decades, stigma remains surrounding the topic and often times people fall into the thought of, "It can't happen to me."

An estimated 294,000 East Tennesseans can be diagnosed with some form of mental illness in a given year. Our message at the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee and Mental Health America is simply:

- **Mental illnesses are real, recognizable, and treatable**
- **Early treatment may reduce the effects of a mental illness**
- **There is hope**
- **There is help available**

A **mental illness** is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. **Mental health problems** can be related to excessive stress due to a particular situation or series of events. As with cancer or diabetes, mental illnesses are often physical as well as emotional and psychological.

The outward signs of a mental illness are often behavioral. Individuals may be extremely quiet or withdrawn. On the contrary, he or she may burst into tears or have anger outbursts. Even after treatment has started, a person can still exhibit some minor symptoms.

Warning Signs of a Mental Illness in Adults Include:

- Confused thinking
- Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
- Feelings of extreme “highs” or “lows”
- Excessive fears, worries, or anxieties
- Social withdrawal
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Strong feelings of anger
- Delusions or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with everyday stressors

Warning Signs of Mental Illness in Adolescents:

- Substance abuse
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Change in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments
- Defiance of authority, truancy, theft, or vandalism
- Intense fear of weight gain
- Prolonged negative mood, often accompanied by poor appetite or thoughts of death
- Frequent outbursts of anger

Warning Signs of Mental Illness in Younger Children:

- Changes in school performance
- Poor grades despite strong efforts
- Excessive worry or anxiety (i.e. refusing to go to bed or school)
- Hyperactivity
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression
- Frequent temper tantrums

Remember, you are not alone and help is available.
Early intervention is the key to successful treatment.