



Mental Health and Mental Illness

Often in our society the term “Mental health” and the term “Mental illness” are interchanged or misused when discussing or describing a person’s mental state. The terms describe two different situations regarding people’s ability to function within societal guidelines.

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. **(WHO)**

A **Mental illness** is a condition that impacts a person's thinking, feeling or mood and may affect his or her ability to relate to others and function on a daily basis. **(NAMI)**

We strive to be “mentally healthy” so that we can be productive community citizens and enjoy life. Just like in striving to be physically healthy there are actions that we can take to be mentally healthy. Some of those actions are interconnected with the actions to maintain physical health.

They include:

- Eating healthy foods and maintaining an appropriate weight
- Exercising regularly and managing stress
- Getting adequate sleep according to our age
- Engaging in activities we enjoy and bring us pleasure
- Creating productive work
- Participating in spiritually based interactions
- Fostering social interactions

Sometimes we feel “off balance” in our mental health just as we might be “under the weather” in our physical health. When that happens we need to connect with persons and activities that help us find balance again. These might include talking with family, friends, a Spiritual Director or Counselor. It might include engaging in activities that help us feel peaceful such as prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, Nature related interactions. This is very much like having a physical “Check up” or talking to a Doctor about your physical health and engaging in short term treatment.

Staying mentally healthy is very much in our control and based on our choices just as staying physically healthy is very much in our control and based on our choices.

A Mental illness is similar to a physical illness. It can be the result of the consequences of our prior choices or it can be beyond our control. Like a physical illness a mental illness needs to be assessed, diagnosed and follow a prescribed treatment plan by a certified professional. Some mental illnesses can be cured or controlled. Some are more difficult to manage and can result in severe incapacity or death. Like a physical illness there should be no shame in having a mental illness but the person does need to follow the prescribed treatment plan whether that is medication, therapy or both.

Mentally ill persons need the support of their family and friends. In some situations they can live and manage on their own, some can reside with family or friends and some need specialized care. All persons with a mental illness need love, understanding, compassion, respect and support. Like everyone else, they deserve to live a full, productive and enjoyable life within their capabilities.