

# Understanding and Dealing with Mental Illness



*An Information Booklet for those who  
are suffering from Mental Illness and  
those who are caring for them*

*In light of the  
Islamic Principles*

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## **What is Mental Illness?**

Mental illnesses are disorders of thought, emotions and behavior. They may afflict people from all walks of life regardless of their gender, culture, religion and economic status. There are many different types of mental disorders. Some of these are severe and others are not. Some are short-term and others are long-term. Some are easy to treat, others take a long time to treat. They are generally treated with a combination of medications and different types of psychotherapies and counseling. Proper assessment and diagnosis is necessary for successful treatment. The following are a few examples of mental disorders that people often suffer from.

### **Psychotic Disorders**

These disorders are characterized by a loss of ability to distinguish from what is real and what is not. People suffering from these disorders sometimes hear and see things that others cannot. Some become very suspicious and begin to believe that others are trying to harm them. Some begin to assume other identities besides their own. Some believe that either god or the devil communicate with them. Some totally or occasionally withdraw into their own imaginary world and lose touch with the reality around them. Psychotic disorders are the most severe form of mental illnesses.

## **Mood Disorders**

Mood disorders are characterized by severe depression or elation (mania, euphoria), or a cycling between the two states. Unlike normal sadness, grief, or a feeling of being high, these disorders severely affect a person's normal day-to-day life rendering him/her largely dysfunctional to carry on with the routines of life. Their mood swings are either too high or too low. A clinically depressed person loses all interest and hope in life. They lose their appetite, find it difficult to go to sleep, and when they go to sleep they keep waking up and find it difficult to go back to sleep. They become unable to look after their own needs and the needs of their families. Often they are preoccupied with ending their life. In manic state, their minds become overly active; they make grandiose plans, go on buying sprees, talk incessantly and generally appear hyperactive.

## **Anxiety Disorders**

These disorders are characterized by a generalized feeling of anxiety and fear. Severe anxiety about a pending doom may lead to panic attacks, whereby a person may begin to feel physically weak, dizzy, unable to breathe, and may even faint. Anxiety may also show up in the form of phobias, physical aches and pains, constipation, diarrhea, nausea, nervousness and a generalized feeling of stress. Obsessive thoughts and compulsive behavior also result from severe anxiety and fear, which the patient generally is not able to control.

## **Personality Disorders**

These disorders refer to behaviors or traits that are characteristic of a person's recent and long-term functioning generally since adolescence or early adulthood. These behaviors or traits cause either significant impairment in social or occupational functioning or subjective distress. These disorders are manifested by difficulties in interpersonal relationships with others. There are many different types of personality disorders. Some of them are known as Obsessive-Compulsive, Antisocial, Paranoid, Avoidant, Narcissistic and Dependent Personalities. A common characteristic of all of them is that people suffering from personality disorders generally do not take responsibility for their own lives and feelings; instead, they tend to blame others. They lack sufficient coping mechanisms to adapt and deal with everyday stresses and problems. Generally, they either do not believe they have a problem, or believe that that is the way they are and that they cannot change who they are. Therefore, they often do not seek any treatment. These disorders are some of the most difficult to treat, and often the care-givers and family members are the ones who suffer the most from their consequences.

## **Addictions**

Some consider addictions, to alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography and internet, to be a form of mental illness. Often, these addictions meet some emotional and psychological needs of the person. Therefore, in these cases, the person loses his will to stop himself from engaging into the addicted behavior or substance, knowing full well the dangers and risk involved.

## **Mental Retardation, Learning and Developmental Disorders**

These disorders are almost always diagnosed in early childhood. They generally result from a handicapping condition at birth, and sometimes from injuries to brain and nervous system in later life. As a result, the person's cognitive, psychological, emotional and social functions are impaired. Consequently, he/she may not be able to develop normally, perform well in school and in social situations, or be able to control his/her behavior. The severity of these disorders is quite variable. The treatment or management of these conditions depends upon the severity of handicap; however, a supportive and consistent environment at home and school significantly impacts on the success.

### **Dealing with Mental Illness**

It is important to understand that:

1. Mental illness is indeed an illness, and not a sign of one's weakness.
2. We do not choose to become mentally ill, like we do not choose to become physically ill.
3. Mental illnesses result from a variety of causes including heredity, bio-chemical imbalances, learned behavior, trauma, early life physical and emotional deprivations.
4. Some physical illnesses, especially the severe and the chronic ones, may also cause some symptoms of mental illness, such as severe depression.
5. Drug abuse and brain injury or dysfunction may also cause mental illness like symptoms.

6. Mental illness may be as painful as the physical illness and sometimes the emotional pain is even worse.
7. On the other hand, some severely mentally ill people may appear very normal and, therefore, may be potentially dangerous to themselves and/or others.
8. Like physical illness, it is treatable. However, the treatment of mental illness may not be as straightforward as the treatment of physical illness.
9. Often the family members have to get involved in the treatment and support of the patient. Without their involvement and support, the recovery often may be very difficult or even impossible.
10. Like some chronic physical illnesses, some types of mental illnesses require long-term treatment and may still not be totally healed.
11. Like in some physical illnesses, patients with some serious mental illnesses may also need to be hospitalized for treatment.
12. Unlike physical illnesses, context plays a very important role in the onset, duration, and treatment of mental illnesses.

## **What is not Mental Illness?**

The stress and emotional upset caused by the events of daily life, loss of belongings and loved ones, physical diseases, marital and family problems, and problems at work place, are normal for all of us. These types of problems generally do not require treatment. If they become overwhelming, counseling may be sought to solve them. However, if they are allowed to go on for too long, they may turn into mental illnesses.

Sometimes external influences produce mental illness like symptoms. These are not true mental illnesses either and must be ruled out. A proper assessment by a believing and open-minded mental health professional along with a spiritual healer is necessary to diagnose these influences and to determine appropriate course of treatment. (For more details, look under the heading *The Islamic Perspective on Mental Illness*.)

## **Treatment**

Mental Illnesses are generally treatable or at least manageable. The following are some factors which help or hinder the treatment:

1. If the person suffering from mental illness or the family members do not accept the fact that it is indeed an illness and must be treated, the illness and the resulting sufferings are prolonged unnecessarily.
2. Proper assessment and diagnosis is a must for successful treatment.
3. Doctor-patient and therapist-client relationships are very important in the effectiveness of the treatment. It is, therefore, crucial to pick a mental health professional who the patient and the family can trust and relate to easily.
4. Ideally, treatment consists of a combination of medication management and psychotherapy, but the need for each type of treatment varies from person to person depending upon the severity and urgency of the situation.
5. The length of treatment varies significantly due to many factors, but it is important to remember that

healing and cure often occurs gradually because of the nature of illness. Being patient with and steadfast in following the treatment strategies is extremely important in the healing process. The treatment is often unsuccessful due to a lack of follow-through with the treatment regimen and expecting a quick fix for the problem.

6. The beliefs and attitudes of a patient are also important factors in the success of treatment. Since mental illness, unlike physical illness, is a disease of mind, soul and emotions, the person's beliefs play an important role in the illness itself and its treatment.
7. For successful treatment, the context of the patient – home, school, work, family, social/communal environment, must be taken into consideration during assessment and treatment to determine what role it plays in feeding and maintaining the illness, and what changes need to be made in the context for the successful rehabilitation of the patient.
8. Among the contextual factors, family environment is the most important one. If the family members are willing to cooperate in bringing the necessary changes in the family environment, the treatment progresses more smoothly and the progress is sustained easily.
9. Hospitalization may sometimes be necessary in order to manage the severity of illness, and to change and control the context in which the illness has occurred.

## **Tips for the Caregivers and Family**

The caregivers and family members must be able to recognize the early signs of mental illness, as well as learn ways to support, care and cope with the illness of a loved



one. The following are some early warning signals. If not properly understood and appropriately dealt with in a timely fashion, these may lead to mental illnesses in future.

### **Early Signs of Mental Illness in Adults**

- ✓ Confused thinking
- ✓ Prolonged sadness or irritability
- ✓ Mood swings – extremely high and low
- ✓ Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- ✓ Social withdrawal
- ✓ Noticeable changes in eating or sleeping habits
- ✓ Uncontrollable anger – verbal, physical violence
- ✓ Delusions or hallucinations
- ✓ Growing inability to cope with daily life
- ✓ Suicidal thoughts
- ✓ Denial of obvious problems
- ✓ Unexplained physical complaints
- ✓ Substance abuse

### **Early Signs of Mental Illness in Youth**

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

## **Early Signs of Mental Illness in Children**

- ✓ Changes in school performance
- ✓ Poor grades despite strong efforts
- ✓ Excessive worry or anxiety
- ✓ Hyperactivity or withdrawal
- ✓ Persistent nightmares
- ✓ Persistent disobedience or aggression
- ✓ Frequent temper tantrums

## **Tips for Handling a Mentally Ill Family Member**

- ✓ Learn more about the behavioral and emotional changes you notice in the person from experts.
- ✓ Do not make light of the problems – they will not go away by themselves.
- ✓ Do not become part of the problems by blaming or taking blame.
- ✓ Do not be ashamed or feel guilty to seek help. The sooner you seek help, the better the chances of a quick recovery.
- ✓ Keep expectations realistic, even if this means lowering them.
- ✓ Try not to react emotionally to the emotional outbursts of the person.
- ✓ Remember that mental illness affects the thinking and reasoning processes of the person. They may not have control over their thoughts and feelings.
- ✓ Do not tolerate abuse of any kind from your family member.
- ✓ Do not blame all of your family members' undesirable behaviors on the mental illness.

- ✓ Acknowledge their thoughts and feelings; do not argue to convince them they are wrong in their thinking or feelings.
- ✓ Be there for support and listening, but do not force them to talk. Listen non-judgmentally and empathize with the feelings.
- ✓ Be respectful and calm.
- ✓ Stick to one topic at a time.
- ✓ Keep a positive attitude.
- ✓ A mutually comfortable physical closeness provides the best support for the suffering.
- ✓ Take care of your emotional needs. Talk your feelings out to a close friend or a relative who can treat the information confidentially.
- ✓ Do not talk about it indiscriminately in the community.
- ✓ Pray and have faith.

## The Islamic Perspective of Mental Illness

As has been mentioned before, there are many different causes of mental illness and mental-illness-like symptoms. The following paragraphs describe some other factors that are not well recognized by the modern scientific mental health professionals.

All cultures and religions of the world throughout the history of mankind have believed in the existence of these factors. Islam provides a more clear understanding of these influences through revealed knowledge. The scientific community rejects them mainly due to the limitation of science not being able to study these factors under laboratory conditions.

However, it is important to remember not to automatically suspect these factors in all cases. A proper diagnosis and assessment must be made to determine the factors contributing to the mental illness, so that appropriate treatment plans may be made.

Everything that has been said thus far about Mental Illness and how to deal with it does not fall beyond the realm of the Islamic teachings. In addition, we find some very interesting facts about mental illness in the holy Qur'an; facts that may revolutionize the understanding and treatment of mental illness, do away with the life-long stigma of being mentally ill, bring permanent cures to some types of severe mental disorders, reduce the length of hospital treatments and the need for repeat admissions.

In the holy Qur'an, Allah (swt) informs us that certain types of mental illnesses are caused by the influence of the Jinn. He tells us the nature of the jinn-kind, their power and limitations, the effects of their influence on humans and how to prevent becoming a prey to these influences and how to treat the effects.

As men have been created of earth matter, jinn have been created of ethereal fire matter. They exist simultaneously on earth along with human beings. They can see us, but we can not see them. There are also good and bad jinn. Among jinn, there are also believers and non-believers.

The non-believer, Shayâtîn, jinns live with the soul purpose of leading mankind astray from their purpose of creation and from submission to the will and guidance of their Creator in this earthly life. They accomplish this through whispering into the minds of mankind - inviting them to do wrongful

things by making them look attractive and desirable; deceiving them into believing untruths; seducing them through the beauties and glamour of this mortal life; and putting fears in their hearts of losing what they love and desire. They are capable of showing themselves to some while others cannot see them; as well as entering into the human bodies and taking charge of the mind and body of the victim.

Their victims are those among the humans who are weak of will, lack self-confidence, struggle for self-identity and acceptance by others, or greedy for more and more pleasures of this earthly existence, power and control.

Their victims appear to suffer from delusions, hallucinations, obsessions, compulsions, anxiety, fear, anger outbursts, multiple personalities, dissociation, sudden energy bursts or drainage of all energy, and even hysteric and epileptic seizures.

The scientific mental health community conveniently interprets all such behaviors as symptoms of various mental disorders.

While Allah (swt) has given the jinn-kind these powers, he has also guided and equipped humans to protect and defend themselves against their influences and control.

Another external influence that may cause mental illness like symptoms, are magical spells that some humans cast upon others to meet their greedy needs. The evidence of magic and casting spells is found in the holy Qur'an as well as in the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (saw). Again, we have

been guided by Allah (swt) to protect and defend ourselves against these influences as well.

**(References from the Holy Qur'an: 15:26-27, 55:15, 2:257, 3:157, 2:102, 7:19-20, 7:27, 7:200-201, 12:5, 19:183, 20-116-120, 23:97, 41:36, c113, c114)**

## **Final Words**

In the management and treatment of mental illness, it is important to properly assess and rule out these external influences before appropriate and effective treatment may be prescribed. It is important to remember that the symptoms of mental illness are not always caused by these external influences. However, a genuinely mentally ill person may become more vulnerable to these influences.

A holistic treatment plan that takes into consideration all aspects of the mental illness – physical, bio-chemical, psychological, socio-cultural, and spiritual and employs appropriate treatment strategies to deal with each aspect of the illness would likely produce the best, fastest and enduring results.

It is, therefore, important to pick a mental health professional who shares, or at least understands, your beliefs, socio-cultural values and norms, and is capable of employing appropriate treatment services and accessing necessary resources to develop a holistic treatment plan.

For further information, contact Dr. Sadiq at [drsadiq@shifa.ca](mailto:drsadiq@shifa.ca), or visit, [www.shifa.ca](http://www.shifa.ca)