

Misconceptions about Mental Illness

NARSAD conducts nationwide survey to determine leading myths

Misconceptions about mental illness are pervasive and the lack of understanding can have serious consequences for millions of people who have a psychiatric illness. NARSAD (the National Alliance for Research in Schizophrenia and Depression) conducted a nationwide survey of mental health professionals to determine the most common myths. 102 responses were received from the experts, who included members of NARSAD's Scientific Council and psychiatrists around the country.

"Misconceptions about mental illness contribute to the stigma, which leads many people to be ashamed and prevents them from seeking help", said Constance Leiber, NARSAD President. "Dispelling these myths is a powerful step toward eradicating the stigma and allaying the fears surrounding brain disorders."

MYTH #1: Psychiatric disorders are not true medical illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. People who have a mental illness are just "crazy".

FACT: Brain disorders, like heart disease and diabetes, are legitimate medical illnesses. Research shows there are genetic and biological causes for psychiatric disorders and they can be treated effectively.

MYTH #2: People with severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, are usually dangerous and violent.

FACT: Statistics show that the incidence of violence in people who have a brain disorder is not much higher than in the general population. Those suffering from a psychosis such as schizophrenia are more often frightened, confused and despairing than violent.

MYTH #3: Mental illness is the result of bad parenting.

FACT: Most experts agree that a genetic susceptibility, combined with other risk factors, leads to a psychiatric disorder. In other words, mental illnesses have a physical cause.

MYTH #4: Depression results from a personality weakness or character flaw, and people who are depressed could just snap out of it if they tried hard enough.

FACT: Depression has nothing to do with being lazy or weak. It results from changes in brain chemistry or brain function, and medication and/or psychotherapy often help people to recover.

MYTH #5: Schizophrenia means "split personality" and there is no way to control it.

FACT: Schizophrenia is often confused with multiple personality disorder. Actually, schizophrenia is a brain disorder that robs people of their ability to think clearly and logically. The estimated 2.5 million Americans with schizophrenia have symptoms ranging from social withdrawal to hallucinations and delusions. Medication has helped many of these individuals to lead fulfilling productive lives.

MYTH #6: Depression is a normal part of the aging process.

FACT: It is not normal for older adults to be depressed. Signs of depression in older people include a loss of interest in activities, sleep disturbances and lethargy. Depression in the elderly is often undiagnosed, and it is important for seniors and their family members to recognize the problem and seek professional help.

MYTH #7: Depression and other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders, do not affect children or adolescents. Any problems they have are just a part of growing up.

FACT: Children and adolescents can develop severe mental illnesses. In the United States, one in ten children and adolescents has a mental disorder severe enough to cause impairment. However, only about 20 percent of these children receive needed treatment. Left untreated, these problems get worse. Anyone talking about suicide should be taken seriously.

MYTH #8: If you have a mental illness, it will go away. Being treated for a psychiatric disorder means an individual has in some way “failed” or is weak.

FACT: A serious mental illness cannot be willed away. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away, either. It takes courage to seek professional help.

MYTH #9: Addiction is a lifestyle choice and shows a lack of will power. People with a substance abuse problem are morally weak or “bad”.

FACT: Addiction is a disease that generally results from changes in brain chemistry. It has nothing to do with being a “bad” person.

MYTH #10: Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) formerly known as “shock treatment”, is painful and barbaric.

FACT: ECT has given a new lease on life to many people who have severe and debilitating depression. It is used when other treatments such as psychotherapy or medication fail or cannot be used. Patients who receive ECT are asleep and under anesthesia, so they do not feel anything.