UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

let's be respectful and empathetic

The Red Elephant Foundation
WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

A person’s emotional and psychological state is what we call his/her mental health. With the world becoming more and more competitive each day, there’s no doubt that people are under a lot of pressure and stress to do well in life. We get so caught up in our everyday lives that we sometimes tend to lose the bigger picture and not take care of our mental health.
WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion or behavior (or a combination of these). They are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities. Mental illness is common, and treatable. The vast majority of individuals with mental illness continue to function in their daily lives.
WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

People who have a mental illness may choose not want to talk about it. Sometimes, this may be because of social stigmas ascribed to mental health. However, mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical condition, just like heart disease or diabetes. And mental health conditions are treatable.
WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

The truth is that mental illness does not discriminate and can affect anyone regardless of your age, gender, income, social status, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, background or other aspect of cultural identity. While mental illness can occur at any age, three-fourths of all mental illness begins by age 24.
WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illnesses are harder to understand than physical ones simply because it is not apparent to the naked eye. Some people hesitate to open up/discuss their mental disorders with others. We need to understand that there is no shame around such illnesses. We should be able to talk about them freely.
WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illnesses take many forms. Some are fairly mild and only interfere in limited ways with daily life, such as certain phobias (abnormal fears). Other mental health conditions may also be severe enough for a person to need care in a hospital. Let's take a look at some of them.
ANXIETY

Anxiety is a condition where a person has intense feelings of fear or distress to such an extent that it affects their everyday life. It is a normal reaction to stress and can also be beneficial in some situations: anxiety can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention.

Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness and involve excessive fear or anxiety.
Clinical depression is a persistent feeling of sadness or a depressed mood that impairs daily life. They lose interest in everyday activities and may go through weight loss or gain as well. In extreme cases of depression, a person may have suicidal thoughts. Those diagnosed with clinical depression may experience fatigue, low self-esteem apart from being emotionally vulnerable and unable to concentrate on anything for long.
OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Obsessive compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas (obsessions) that make them feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions). The repetitive behaviors, such as hand washing, checking on things, or cleaning, can significantly interfere with a person’s daily activities and social interactions.
Trauma is any distressing experience that can affect a person. This could be the death of a loved one, going through an accident or anything that affects one’s mind significantly. Such traumatic events are subjective to each person. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. The memories of the trauma psychologically affect them to an extent that they are not able to go back to leading their everyday lives.
EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are where people experience severe disturbances in their eating behaviors and their thoughts and emotions related to eating. They typically become pre-occupied with food and their body weight. In many cases, eating disorders occur together with other psychiatric disorders like anxiety, panic, obsessive compulsive disorder and alcohol and drug abuse problems. Three kinds of eating disorders are Anorexia, Bulimia and Binge-Eating.
SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Substance abuse refers to the repeated use of substances which are harmful to the mind. At this stage, a person becomes so addicted to the substance that he/she continues to use it even at the cost of harming their mind and body. They reach a stage where they prioritize using or consuming the substance over their normal, everyday activities which are actually important. It also changes the brain and disturbs the normal hierarchy of needs and desires, which is why it is a mental illness.
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects the brain. It is a spectrum disorder – which means that the extent to which it affects a person varies. The most common symptoms of autism include inability to make eye contact and lack of social skills. At one end, a child with severe levels of autism might be non-verbal as well. On the other, a child may just be socially awkward but be high functioning – which is called Asperger’s syndrome.
LANGUAGE!

Mental illnesses can affect a person’s life. We should be careful not to trivialize their experience by using language callously. Using such terms casually is offensive to those who are actually suffering from such illnesses. For instance, when a person is sad about something, he says “I am so depressed about this” or if someone has a habit of doing a particular action often, she says “I have OCD”. Take a step back. Assess your language. Remember, words hurt more than sticks do!
HOW CAN I HELP?
To interact with people who have mental illnesses, it is important to:
- Be respectful of them and their space.
- Be open to listening to them without being judgmental.
- Welcome them if they want to open up to you and be kind when you are communicating with them.
- Don’t put them down or abuse them in any way.
HOW CAN I HELP?

- Understand and respect the fact that what they are going through is hard.
- Let them know that they have a support system in you.
- Do not force or pressurize them to get help, though you can gently suggest it to them.
- In case they are indeed open to getting outside help, support them in finding a sensitized therapist.
REFERENCES

References
www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions
http://www.who.int/topics/substance_abuse/en/
https://www.psychiatry.org/

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