

Coping with mental illnesses

The symptoms of many mental illnesses may get worse if they're left untreated. Reach out for psychological help if you or someone you know may have a mental illness.

If you're unsure where to start, visit your primary care doctor. They can help with the initial diagnosis and provide a referral to a psychiatrist.

It's important to know that you can still have a full and happy life with a mental illness. Working with a therapist and other members of your mental health team will help you learn healthy ways to manage your condition.

Mental health symptoms

Each type of mental illness causes its own symptoms. But many share some common characteristics.

Common signs of several mental illnesses may include:

- not eating enough or overeating
- having insomnia or sleeping too much
- distancing yourself from other people and favorite activities
- feeling fatigue even with enough sleep
- feeling numbness or lacking empathy
- experiencing unexplainable body pains or achiness
- feeling hopeless, helpless or lost
- smoking, drinking, or using illicit drugs more than ever before
- feeling confusion, forgetfulness, irritability, anger, anxiety, sadness, or fright
- constantly fighting or arguing with friends and family
- having extreme mood swings that cause relationship problems
- having constant flashbacks or thoughts that you can't get out of your head
- hearing voices in your head that you can't stop
- having thoughts of hurting yourself or other people
- being unable to carry out day-to-day activities and chores

Stress and periods of emotional distress can lead to an episode of symptoms. That may make it difficult for you to maintain normal behavior and activities. This period is sometimes called a nervous or mental breakdown.

Mental health diagnosis

Diagnosing a mental health disorder is a multi-step process. During a first appointment, your doctor may perform a physical exam to look for signs of physical issues that could be contributing to your symptoms.

Some doctors may order a series of laboratory tests to screen for underlying or less obvious possible causes.

Your doctor may ask you to fill out a mental health questionnaire. You may also undergo a psychological evaluation. You might not have a diagnosis after your first appointment.

Your doctor may refer you to a mental health expert. Because mental health can be complex and symptoms may vary from person to person, it may take a few appointments for you to get a full diagnosis.



Mental health treatment

Treatment for mental health disorders is not one size fits all, and it does not offer a cure. Instead, treatment aims to reduce symptoms, address underlying causes, and make the condition manageable.

You and your doctor will work together to find a plan. It may be a combination of treatments because some people have better results with a multi-angle approach. Here are the most common mental health treatments:

Medications

The four main categories of medications used to treat mental health disorders are antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, antipsychotic medications, and mood-stabilizing medications.

Which type is best for you will depend on the symptoms you experience and other health issues you may face. People may try a few medications at different doses before finding something that's right for them.

Psychotherapy

Talk therapy is an opportunity for you to talk with a mental health provider about your experiences, feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Therapists primarily act as a sounding board and neutral mediator, helping you learn coping techniques and strategies to manage symptoms.

Hospital and residential treatment

Some people may need brief periods of intensive treatment at hospitals or residential treatment facilities. These programs allow an overnight stay for in-depth treatment. There are also daytime programs, where people can participate in shorter periods of treatment.

Lifestyle treatments and home remedies

Alternative treatments can be used in addition to mainstream treatments as a supplement. These steps won't eliminate mental health issues alone, but they can be helpful.

They include sticking to your treatment plan as closely as possible, avoiding alcohol and drugs, and adopting a healthy lifestyle that incorporates foods that may be a benefit to your brain.

Mental health therapy

The term therapy refers to several styles of talk therapy. Therapy can be used to treat a variety of disorders, including panic disorders, anxiety, depression, anger issues, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Therapy helps people identify mental health issues and unhealthy behaviors or thought patterns. During sessions you and your therapist can work to change these thoughts and behaviors.

In most cases, therapists focus on current issues, things that are affecting your daily life, and help you find solutions to what you're experiencing in real time, but each doctor's approach is different.

