

## Myths and Misconceptions about Mental Illness.



BUILDING ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS.

### **People who have a mental illness are more dangerous than the general population.**

**Fact:** The vast majority of people with mental illnesses are not violent. In the cases when violence does occur, the incidence typically results from the same reasons as with the general public, such as feeling threatened or excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs. The media often sensationalizes accounts of crime. Statistics do not show a connection between mental illness and violence.

### **Persons who have mental illness do not get better (they never recover).**

**Fact:** People with mental illnesses can recover and resume normal activities. Most people lead productive lives, work, pursue education and religion, enjoy hobbies, recreational activities, and contribute actively due to treatments, a variety of support systems, programs, and/or medications. For example, spokespersons like Mike Wallace, newspaperman; Terry Bradshaw, athlete; and Brooke Shields, actor, have had major depression, received treatment, and lead successful lives today.

### **Untreated mental illness does not affect your school performance and grades.**

**Fact:** Mental illnesses may interfere with functioning in different ways. Many illnesses may affect a student's ability to do certain things, such as thinking or communicating with others. It is estimated that more than one in five youth in Idaho may experience a mental health disorder. Some of these disorders include: depression (mood disorders), anxiety disorders, conduct disorders, and eating disorders.

### **Movies and newspaper always provide an accurate picture of what it's like to have a mental illness.**

**Fact:** The media is responsible for many of the misconceptions which persist about people with mental illnesses. Newspapers, in particular, often stress a history of mental illness in the backgrounds of people who commit crimes of violence. Television news stories frequently sensationalize crimes where persons with mental illnesses are involved. Similarly, movie scripts often have plots that perpetuate myths about persons who have mental illness through distorted characterizations. National advertisers use stigmatizing images as promotional gimmicks to sell products. Moreover, comedians may make fun of people with mental illnesses, using their disabilities as a source of humor.

### **Mental illness is a weakness you can overcome if you really want to.**

**Fact:** Some people believe "mental illness" is not a legitimate medical/health condition. Some believe that mental illness is a character flaw or weakness that a person "can just" get over. Mental illnesses are real, common, and treatable. Recovery is possible and often requires time and resources that are not necessarily in the person's direct control. When persons with mental illness receive treatment, medication, and support, they can recover.

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## **You can always tell if a person has a mental illness.**

**Fact:** Although there are many signs and symptoms when someone may be developing a mental illness, diagnosis is a difficult task best undertaken by mental health professionals. Quick judgments and stereotypes do not replace the need for a person to get help from a mental health professional.

## **Persons who have a mental illness are treated fairly in housing or employment situations.**

**Fact:** Research suggests that employers are less likely to hire persons who are labeled mentally ill (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1987; Farina & Felner, 1973 & Link, 1987). At the employer level, some have false expectations related to the employment capabilities of persons with mental illness (Brown & Saura, 1996). Some people also believe that those with mental illness are less competent, unable to work, should be institutionalized, or will never get better.

Persons with mental illnesses may face many housing difficulties. They face problems looking for safe, decent, and affordable housing, and some may need assistance to live in their own residence. An example stigma is the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome. It impedes the placement of supported housing for people with serious mental illnesses in certain neighborhoods.

## **People can get over depression by themselves and depression never reoccurs.**

**Fact:** It is important for people with depression to get treatment from a mental health professional or from their physician. Many people are not able to recognize depression in themselves or others. Clinical depression is very treatable, with improvement shown in 80% for those persons treated.

## **Only adults and older adults experience mental illnesses.**

**Fact:** Mental illnesses occur in persons of all ages, all ethnic, racial, educational, and religious groups. They do not discriminate. Mental illnesses appear in families of all backgrounds in every community across the country. Over 4 million youth experience a major mental illness that can result in significant problems at home, at school, and with peers. Among children and youth ages 9-17, there are one or two with serious emotional problems in virtually every classroom in the country. Over seven million older adults age 65 and older in the United States (20 percent of the older adult population) have a mental illness and that number is expected to double into 15 million people in the next three decades. Depression can occur along with other physical illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Suicide rates are highest among Americans age 65 and older.

## **Only crazy people see shrinks.**

**Fact:** People of all ages and all walks of life seek help from a variety of mental health professionals, including psychiatrists. Seeking out and accepting help are signs of positively coping and of preventing situations from getting worse.

## **If you talk about suicide, you won't attempt it.**

**Fact:** Suicidal comments have to always be taken seriously as they often lead to plans, attempts, or completions. If you are worried about yourself or another person, and do not know how serious the problem is, know where to get help. It's better to be safe than sorry.

*Content is based on material developed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.*



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**For more information about the Idaho System of Care and services and support available in your area, call the Idaho CareLine by dialing 211 or 1-800-926-2588.**

**You also can contact the Idaho Federation of Families, an Idaho-based support organization for families with children affected by SED, on the Web at [www.idffcmh.org](http://www.idffcmh.org) or by calling 1-800-905-3436.**