Live Well, Work Well

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The Difference Between Mental Health and Mental Illness

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a national campaign designed to raise awareness about mental health issues and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. Mental health issues and mental illness are common. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly 60 million U.S. adults lived with mental illness in 2021.

Your mental health is as important to your overall well-being as your physical health, but it's often overlooked. Similarly, mental illness often goes untreated or undiscussed. According to Mental Health America, over half of adults with mental illness don't receive treatment.

Although mental health and mental illness are related, they aren't the same. Mental illness can contribute to poor mental health and vice versa, but it's possible to have poor mental health without a diagnosable mental illness just as it's possible to have good mental health with a mental illness. This article explains the difference between mental health and mental illness.

Understanding Mental Health

Mental health describes your psychological state of well-being. This includes how you feel, think and interact with others. But your mental health doesn't just impact your mood and cognition; it also affects your physical health. Poor mental health can cause digestive issues, headaches, insomnia, fatigue and other physical symptoms.

Everybody has mental health, just like everyone has physical health. Your mental health can change over time and may be influenced by numerous factors, including:

- Stress
- Burnout
- Grief
- Physical or mental fatigue
- Financial hardship
- Physical health

Although mental health may look different for everyone, it's often measured by one's ability to:

- Cope with stress, change and adversity
- Maintain healthy relationships
- Participate in productive activities (e.g., school and work)

Poor mental health can develop into mental illness if symptoms are unmanaged. This can cause distress and the inability to function in everyday activities.

Improving Mental Health

Just like physical health, mental health can be improved with positive lifestyle choices. The following are ways to better your mental health and improve your overall well-being:

- Practice relaxation exercises, such as meditation, journaling and listening to music.
- Make time for people who uplift you.
- Take part in meaningful activities, such as volunteering or joining a recreational sports club.
- Spend time outdoors.
- Take care of your body by exercising, eating well and getting adequate sleep.

Speak to a professional if you need someone to talk to. Even if you feel fine, they can help you proactively manage your mental health.

Understanding Mental Illness

A mental illness is a diagnosable health condition that changes the way you think, feel or act. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mental illness is one of the most commonly diagnosed health conditions in the United States, affecting 1 in 5 Americans every year. Even if you don't have a mental illness, they could affect the people around you, including your friends, family and co-workers.

Similar to physical health conditions, mental illness can take many forms and range in severity. Examples of common mental illnesses include:

- Depression disorder
- Anxiety disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Substance use disorder
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia disorder

Mental illness can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender or background. The following factors may increase the risk of developing a mental illness in your lifetime:

- Genetics
- Alcohol or drug use
- Trauma or abuse
- Other chronic medical conditions (e.g., cystic fibrosis or cancer)
- Loneliness

Managing Mental Illness

Mental illness is treatable and can be alleviated. Depending on your condition, successfully managing a mental illness may include a combination of healthy lifestyle choices and professional treatment.

Here are some ways mental illness may be treated:

- Talk therapy
- Medication
- Support groups
- Exercise
- Healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., eating and sleeping well)

You don't have to suffer with a mental illness alone. Seek professional support immediately if you're struggling with a mental illness. You can also check with your employer for more information on available resources, such as an employee assistance program.

Conclusion

Everyone can take steps to better their mental health, but some mental illness is unpreventable. Understanding the difference between mental health and mental illness is crucial to ensure you get the proper support for your needs.

For further mental health assistance, contact Higginbotham today.

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