

July | 2018

What is mental health?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, is able to work productively and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

What are the symptoms?



Schizophrenia and other types of psychosis



Depression



New onset aggression



Persistent sadness



Increased and uncharacteristic alcohol or drug abuse



Insomnia or excessive sleeping



Suicidal thoughts and specific plans how to carry this out



Loss of interest in personal appearance



Persistent feeling of helplessness.



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

1 What causes mental illnesses?

Mental illness can affect people of any age from small children to the elderly.

Some possible causes include:

- Stressful work environments
- Abuse at home
- Discrimination at work
- Personality factors can make one vulnerable to mental health problems
- Genetic factors can also play a role
- Traumatic brain injury
- A mother's exposure to viruses, toxic chemicals or alcohol while pregnant
- Familiar medical conditions like thyroid disease can also be the underlying cause of a mental health illness.

2 How is the diagnosis made?

By definition, to become a 'disorder' a condition has to interfere with a person's functioning. We all feel depressed and "under the weather" at one point or the other, however once this feeling is prolonged and leads to problems at work or in social relationships, then this indicates a 'disorder' requiring intervention.

Most people will have no insight into their condition and can even deny that they are unwell. The most significant person in identifying the possibility of a mental disorder is a family member, colleague or friend. If a mental disorder is suspected, then the person should consult with a medical professional (e.g. a GP) who will be able to diagnose and recommend treatment for the condition.

3 What is the treatment?

Mental disorders generally require a multi-disciplinary approach to manage them. The team includes family, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and employers (if the individual is employed). Each condition is treated differently and there are different treatment options, ranging from counseling to medication and electroconvulsive therapy.

4 Mental health and the workplace

Work is a major determinant of mental health and is key to social integration. To be excluded from the workforce creates material deprivation, erodes self-confidence, creates a sense of isolation and marginalisation and is a key risk factor for mental disability. Work is one of the social activities that conveys a sense of self-worth and social identity. While work itself can be a trigger and a cause of mental illness for people with a serious mental disorder, employment is an important stepping-stone to recovery. It is a normalising factor that provides daily structure, routine and meaningful goals. It improves self-esteem, increases finances, provides opportunities to make friendships and obtain social support. In the workplace employees are encouraged to take advantage of Employee Assistance Programs to seek help timeously.

5 What are some prevention methods?

Children:

- Provide children with a stable environment that is sensitive to health
- Adequate nutritional needs are met
- Protection from threats
- Opportunities for early learning
- Emotional support and positive stimulation
- Provide children with life skills programs.

Adults:

- Employers should institute stress prevention interventions at work through wellness programs
- By their very nature, mental illnesses make it hard for the affected person to ask for help. If you are concerned you should consider sharing your thoughts with a close family member, colleague or friend. Otherwise one can contact their local GP or health practitioner, health and wellness official at work or school, or use one of the many available free helplines.