

9 Myths About Mental Illness & Therapy

By MARGARITA TARTAKOVSKY, M.S.
Associate Editor

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2012/05/10/mental-health-month-9-myths-about-mental-illness-therapy/>



Even in today's advanced world, there's still much misunderstanding and stigma surrounding mental illness. Many of us are quick to dismiss people with mental illness as inferior or less than or wonder why they can't just snap out of it.

Many of us also rarely believe that mental illness merits the same understanding and compassion as medical illnesses such as diabetes, cancer or heart disease.

Such stigma has devastating effects. It "prevents some people from accessing support and professional help and breeds shame and secrecy, which can significantly worsen a person's condition as well as their prognosis — even to a point of being life-threatening, in the case of suicidal ideation," according to Joyce Marter, LCPC, a psychotherapist and owner of Urban Balance, a multi-site counseling practice in the greater Chicago area.

That's why it's so important to talk about the facts. Below, experts share accurate information about mental illness.

1. Myth: Having a mental illness means you're weak.

Fact: Having a mental illness has nothing to do with strength, and it can't be willed away, according to Deborah Serani, PsyD, psychologist and author of Living with Depression. Think of it this way: Would you expect someone to will away their diabetes?

Serani also pointed out that seeking help for mental illness takes strength — especially in today's society. "Despite research showing how mental illness is a real medical illness, society continues to stigmatize people who have them."

2. Myth: Anyone who behaves erratically is "bipolar" or "borderline."

Fact: "Bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder are complex biopsychosocial disorders that can usually be successfully managed through a combination of psychotherapy and medication," said Dr. John Grohol, founder of Psych Central.com.

But many people, even religious leaders, assume that individuals who display different aspects of their personality or behave irrationally are "bipolar," Marter said.

Marter shared an example of a client who was about to tell her priest that she'd been hospitalized for an episode and was working really hard to recover.

Unfortunately, before she could, the priest called another person “crazy and bipolar.” As Marter said, “Like many, it probably would never have occurred to him that this attractive, intelligent, lovely woman dealt with a mental illness.”

3. Myth: People with a mental illness don’t lead productive lives.

Fact: “People with a mental illness who receive treatment with therapy and medication can live full, enjoyable and productive lives,” Serani said. Marter regularly sees highly educated and successful people who have mood disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders or substance abuse.

Many high-profile people also have struggled with mental illness, including Harrison Ford, Halle Berry and Terry Bradshaw. In her book *Living with Depression*, Serani lists over 400 high-profile individuals.

“People with mental illness look like you and me and very well may be you and me at various points in our lives. We all have issues and nobody is immune from the effects of mental illness on ourselves, our friends, our families and our communities,” Marter said.

4. Myth: Psychotherapy is like talking to a friend.

Fact: While social support is key for well-being, both Marter and Serani stressed that friends aren’t a replacement for therapy. “Therapy is a place to process your feelings with an objective professional who will compassionately collaborate with you to process your feelings, understand yourself and your relationships, improve your thinking and clarify your work [and] life vision,” Marter said.

Serani also has heard people call therapy a ripoff because you’re paying someone to listen to you. In a way, you are, she said, except that you’re working with “an Olympic medal listener.”

Therapists train many years to become effective listeners in order to gain understanding, identify and analyze, she said.

5. Myth: Seeking psychotherapy means you have “serious” problems.

Fact: “Seeing a therapist is healthy, normal, positive and proactive,” Marter said. Therapy can be valuable in various ways. For instance, it can teach you strategies to process your emotions and cope with life stressors, help identify and change negative beliefs or patterns in your life and understand more about your behaviors, relationships and yourself, she said.

6. Myth: Therapists tell you what to do.

Fact: Therapists don’t dole out advice. Instead, they help you help yourself, Serani said. “Advice-giving creates dependency, whereas helping you discover your behavioral pattern and motives creates self-awareness.”

“The goal of psychotherapy is to empower you with ways to deal with life issues, learn your triggers and build resiliency, so you can find well-being,” she said. She likened therapy to the famous Chinese proverb: “Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; you feed him for a lifetime.”

7. Myth: Medication is enough to treat mental illness.

Fact: Research shows that psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), is highly effective for mental illness, said John Duffy, Ph.D, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Available Parent: Radical Optimism for Raising Teens and Tweens*.

A combination of psychotherapy and medication also is effective. (In fact, Marter recommended that individuals taking medication participate in psychotherapy, too.)

Also important is seeing a psychiatrist as opposed to a general practitioner, Marter said. “There is great variance among physicians regarding training, knowledge and experience with treating mental disorders.” Psychiatrists have a deeper understanding of psychotropic medication.

8. Myth: Having a parent with mental illness guarantees you’ll struggle, too.

Fact: As Duffy said, “though you may inherit a predisposition to certain mental illnesses, you may never suffer the symptoms, and there are preventive measures you can take.” Some of these measures include: the ability to effectively identify emotions, communicate well, cope with stress and participate in physical activities. Essentially, it’s any measure that can help you “build resilience for that time if [or] when mental illness comes along,” he said.

9. Myth: Alcoholism and substance abuse are the result of poor lifestyle choices.

Fact: “Addiction is a disease,” Marter said. She explained that it’s a biological, genetically-based disorder. “Its hallmark is progressive use in the face of adverse consequences [such as] effects on school or work, health, finance, legal, relationships.”

With mental illness, there’s no “us” vs. “them.” Mental illness touches *everyone*. Please educate yourself, and proceed with compassion.