



MENTAL ILLNESS

Myths that Hurt. Truths that Help.

Many people aren't aware of the fact that mental illness is common. Statistics show that one out of five Alaskans is affected during a given year. The other four in five may be faced with mental illness in a friend, family member or co-worker. In other words, mental illnesses, from mild to chronic, touch us all.

Yet in spite of this fact, people are more aware of the myths of mental illness than the facts. Dispelling these myths is an important first step in educating Alaskans that mental illnesses are *real, common, and treatable*.

Myth #1: Mental illness is unusual

Fact: Mental illness varies in its severity, but it's hardly uncommon. One in five Americans experiences a mental illness of some kind each year.

Myth # 2: Mental illness is a single disorder.

Fact: Mental illness is not a single disease but a collective description of many specific illnesses such as anxiety, depression, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), eating disorders, personality disorders, schizophrenia, and organic brain disorders.

Myth # 3: Mental illness only happens to people with a family history.

Fact: Some mental illnesses do run in families; however, many conditions reflect biochemical disturbances in the brain, while others are triggered by exposure to stressful events.

Myth #4: People with mental illness are poor and/or less intelligent.

Fact: Many studies show that most mentally ill people have average or above-average intelligence. Mental illness, like physical illness, can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, social class or income level.

Myth #5: People with mental illness are violent

Fact: Only a small percent of people with mental illness are violent. Most of the violence you see is the inaccurate and sensational portrayal of the mentally ill by the media. In truth, the mentally ill are far more often the victims of violence.

Myth #6: Mental illness is caused by personal weakness.

Fact: A serious mental illness cannot be willed away. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away, either. It takes courage to seek professional help.

Myth # 7 Mental illness is the same as mental retardation.

Fact: Mental illness is not the same as mental retardation an outdated term for developmental conditions that usually appear at birth. Mental illness usually develops later in life. There is not a correlation between intelligence and mental illness.

Myth # 8: People with a mental illness are unable to function well.

Fact: People with mental illnesses can recover and resume normal activities thanks to a variety of support tools, programs, and



medications. A good example is Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes,” who has received treatment and leads an enriched and accomplished life.

Myth #9: Depression and anxiety disorders are part of growing up.

Fact: Children and adolescents can develop severe mental illnesses. In the United States, one in 10 children and adolescents has a mental disorder severe enough to cause impairment. However, only about 20 percent of these children receive needed treatment. Left untreated, these problems can worsen. Anyone talking about suicide should be taken very seriously.

Myth #10: Depression is a normal part of the aging process.

Fact: It is not normal for older adults to be depressed. Depression in the elderly is often undiagnosed, and it is important for seniors and their family members to recognize the problem and seek professional help.

Myth #11: Mentally ill employees tend to be second-rate workers.

Fact: Research has shown that there is no difference between the productivity of workers with and without mental illness, whether they are working in skilled, managerial or professional positions. Employers who have hired these individuals report that their attendance, motivation and work quality is as good as or better than that of other employees.

Myth #12: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) happens only after you fight in a war. That's why it's called shell shock.

Fact: PTSD can occur after any traumatic event such as a rape or other violent attack, natural disaster, or learning of the unexpected death of a loved one. A person with PTSD avoids reminders of the event and feels "on edge" or anxious most of the time.