



Talking about mental illness

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Most everyone would agree mental health is important. Our language is filled with expressions that not only describe good mental health in positive terms, but suggest good mental health helps people be successful. We say it's important to stay sharp, focused and mindful, to think clearly. We admire people who are "reasonable" and "thoughtful," and who have a "good head on their shoulders."

But we have a much harder time talking about mental illness. Unfortunately, when we do, we often use words that stigmatize mental illness, and individuals who have it. If you think about, you know what I mean. Many of these expressions are so common we might not even realize we're saying them, or that they could be very hurtful to someone with mental illness.

The truth is, mental illness can be scary. But using pejorative expressions to describe individuals suffering from mental illness not only perpetuates that fear, but makes it hard to have any compassion for people struggling with these diseases. Worst of all, continuing to stigmatize mental illness often make people ashamed to seek treatment.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) defines mental illness as a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling or mood. This includes a range of conditions such as anxiety and depression (which are among the most common mental illnesses), phobias and eating disorders, as well as more complex conditions such as bipolar disorders, psychosis and schizophrenia. Any of these conditions can affect an individual's ability to relate to others and function each day.

Mental illness is also much more common than people realize. According to NAMI, one in five adults in the U.S. – and approximately the same percentage of children – experience a mental illness each year. The next time you are at the grocery store or church or a school function, look around – you very likely know someone with mental illness.

One of the most important things doctors know about these disorders is that all types of mental illness can be treated. Although people once believed a person with mental illness would always have it, today we know people can recover from mental illness and live independent, productive lives in their communities.

Recovery can mean different things depending on the type of mental illness. For example, an individual with depression may receive counseling to learn strategies for dealing with negative thoughts and feelings, and use medication to help relieve symptoms. In some cases, a person receiving treatment may never experience depression again and is able to stop using medication.

More complex mental disorders often require more intensive treatments and supports, and may require an individual to use medication for many years. But this is no different than how we treat many physical conditions. We know a person with diabetes may need to take insulin for the rest of his or her life in order to control the disease and reduce the risk of being hospitalized with complications.

The same is true for some types of mental illness: an individual may use medication throughout life to control the symptoms – but by doing so, that individual reduces the risk of being hospitalized with complications. He or she is able to live independently, hold a job, raise a family.

So when we talk about mental illness, let's remember to use terms that show compassion and understanding. Let's not describe someone as "mentally ill" but as a person with mental illness. And let's remember one in five people will have a mental illness, it could be a family member, friend – or even us. There is no shame in that. Mental illness can be treated and people can recover.