

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

### WHAT DOES "MENTAL HEALTH" MEAN?

Health is the way your body feels and works. Being healthy means more than just not being sick. When your body is healthy, you feel good. You are able to go to school, hang out with friends, and do the things you need to do every day.

A healthy mind lets you learn, play, and understand others. Mental health means having good ways to deal with your feelings and how to enjoy life, even when things are hard. Having a healthy mind and body are both very important. Everyone has good days and bad days. A bad day doesn't mean you have a mental illness, but you can still improve your mental health.

### WHAT IS A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Everybody gets sick sometimes. When you have a sore throat, you might take medicine and sleep a lot. If you have a broken arm, you get a cast. Even teachers and parents get sick, and have to take medicine and rest to get better.

Just like physical illness, people can experience a mental illness anytime. You may hear people describe mental illness as a mental disorder, neurological disorder or a mental health challenge. Having a mental illness can change how you think, feel or act. It can sometimes make it harder to do the things you want to do. Just like when your body is sick and you go to a doctor, someone with a mental illness can go to a **mental health professional**.

Some people act in ways that are hard to understand, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have a mental illness. Actions like being violent, getting mad, smoking or doing drugs are not mental illnesses. These are choices people make. People don't choose to have a mental illness, but they can choose to admit if they're having a hard time. That way, they can get help and start feeling better.

### WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE GET MENTAL ILLNESSES?

All kinds of people can experience a mental illness, including kids. It doesn't matter where you live or what kind of family you have.

Adapted from the Walk in Our Shoes initiative



No one knows for sure what causes a mental illness. Researchers think it's a mix of what's going on in your body and what's happening around you. Mental health challenges are not caused by doing something wrong. You can't catch a mental illness from somebody else. Anyone can have a mental illness, and anyone can get better, too.

It is also common to know people who have mental illnesses. It doesn't mean they are crazy, it just means life is different in their shoes.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE DIAGNOSED?

If you feel like you are having a mental health challenge, you can meet with a mental health professional. The mental health professional will listen to you and try to understand what you're going through. A mental health professional will be able to tell if you have a mental illness based on your feelings, how often you have them, and how they affect your life. If your mental health professional thinks you have a mental illness, he or she will give what you are experiencing a name, such as depression or anxiety, and this is called a diagnosis.

Some people with a mental illness take medicine to feel better. Some find a hospital stay gives them a needed time out from the stresses of daily life. Some people find talking with a mental health professional is helpful. The right combination of what helps is different for each person. Once they find something that helps them, most people with a mental illness live healthy, full lives.

### WHAT IS STIGMA?

Have you ever heard unkind words used to describe someone you care about? Have you been called names because the way you look or something else about you?

Labels can hurt. They can make you feel separate from everyone else. Even if you know they are untrue, labels can make you feel bad. Sometimes people who are labeled also get bullied or treated unfairly. When people don't understand how life is in someone else's shoes, they can make unfair and untrue assumptions.

Labels and unfair treatment are results of what we call **stigma**. Stigma comes from negative and incorrect beliefs, or stereotypes, about groups of people. Fear of being left out or picked on because of who you are is a part of stigma. The effects of stigma can make you feel sad, ashamed or alone.

People with mental health challenges sometimes experience stigma. They get called "crazy" or "mental" or "emo." These labels are based on stereotypes, not on fact. You can help break down stigma by learning and sharing the truth about mental health.

Adapted from the Walk in Our Shoes initiative



Funded by counties through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63).

## LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

You might not realize it, but you probably know someone who has a mental illness. It could be a friend, family member, classmate, neighbor, or teacher. Lots of famous people have had struggles with mental health, like President Abraham Lincoln and actress Demi Lovato.

People are made up of many different things. Everyone has different likes and dislikes, talents, thoughts, and bodies. A mental illness is not the only thing to know about a person.

Remember that with help from friends and family, people with mental health challenges can be okay and live a full life.

## HOW TO ACT

What would you do if your friend got sick with the flu or broke his arm? You would probably want to help him get better. What would you do if you found out your friend was having mental health challenges? Or that your friend had a family member with a mental health challenge? You would probably still want to help him feel better. People with mental health challenges need help from their friends and family just as much as if they had a broken bone or sore throat.

## GLOSSARY

**Mental health professional:** A mental health professional is trained to help people improve how they think, feel, and act. Mental health professionals help people solve problems that cause anxious, sad, and angry feelings.

**Stigma:** Stigma occurs when people are looked down on because in some way they are different.

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