

mental health

overcoming the stigma

by Kunle Ogunde

Let the facts allay your fears about this common transcultural illness

Mental illness is a psychological or behavioural pattern that occurs in an individual and is thought to cause distress or disability that is more than expected as part of normal development or culture. One in four people will have a mental illness in their life time. It is not an indication of our strengths or weaknesses. People with a mental illness can experience problems in the way they think, feel or behave. This can significantly affect their relationships, their work, and their quality of life. Having a mental illness is difficult, not only for the person concerned, but also for their families and friends.

Four in five of people with mental illness in UK feel isolated. The stigma and discrimination experienced by people with mental health problems serve the biggest barrier to social inclusion, making it difficult for them to work, access health services, enjoy family life and participate in their communities including church activities.

What causes mental illness?

The exact cause is not yet known for certain but involves changes in our brain chemicals. However we know that many factors work together in causing Mental illness including biological, psychological and environmental factors.

- Biological factors include our genes (heredity), infection especially in childhood (e.g. bacterial infection), brain defect or injury. Most importantly are faulty genes but these still need an interaction with other factors for mental illness to develop. Mental illnesses, just like physical illness may run in families but many develop mental illness without a family history
- Psychological factors such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse especially in

childhood, an important early loss such as loss of a parent and difficulty expressing feelings

- Environmental factors e.g. living in poverty, debt, social or cultural expectations and drug abuse by person or their parents

Recognising Mental illness

There are various forms of Mental illness including Anxiety, depression, Schizophrenia, Bipolar disorder (“manic depressive”) and addiction. Also Autism in children and Dementia in Older age people. Early recognition may be difficult. However family and friends are often the first to spot these early changes which often relates to the type of Mental illness. They may withdraw from others, neglect themselves and things that used to be important to them, lose interest, say or believe things that are clearly untrue within their culture and the persons’ usual held belief. With the stigma associated with Mental illness in many cultures and societies the sufferer and their families may ignore the evidence of Mental Illness.

Are people with Mental illness dangerous?

The simple answer is no. Mentally ill persons are no more likely than others to commit violent acts.

Treatment

Treatment has changed over the years with the replacement of old Victorian asylum institutions with modern regular wards and development of new treatment strategies and effective medication with fewer side effects.

- Self help e.g. exercise, healthy eating, improved sleep attitude

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