

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Let's Talk Mental Health

Between juggling a high-stress managerial job in health care and spending her off-time supporting her mom as she went through chemotherapy, 35-year-old Sylvie*, had reached her limit. “My body became all tense and I was in physical pain—including knots in my shoulders and heart palpitations. I couldn’t sleep at night either. I went to my doctor to talk to her about it and, out of the blue, had a complete meltdown. She referred me to a psychiatrist and I went to a couple of sessions. I also agreed to go on anti-anxiety medications. They help keep me calm which has allowed my mind to relax and work on re-framing my thoughts.”

Having gotten the support she needed, Sylvie is managing her anxiety much more effectively these days. “I realized that a lot of the stress was coming from work. I had a conversation with my boss about it and began making a conscious effort to create a work/life balance.”

Spotting the Differences between Everyday Emotions and a Mental Health Issue

Everyone deals with emotional ups and downs every day. But how can you tell if that stress, sadness or anxiety is just part of life or something more? It can be easy to tell yourself or someone else to “move on”, “suck it up” or “look on the bright side”; however, for someone dealing with mental health challenges, this can dangerously mask or minimize a serious illness. The stigma attached to mental illness can prevent you or someone you know from seeking help. Therefore, the more educated you are about mental illness, the greater the chance you will be to seek the support you need (or encourage a loved one or colleague to get help) before the issue becomes more serious.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Mental Illness

So how can you tell the difference between everyday moodiness, sadness or stress and mental illness? Because we know the pattern of our own lives and those of our loved ones, we have the ability to notice changes in behavior that hint at an underlying mental health issue. Symptoms usually last for many weeks or months (versus a “bad day”) and you may notice changes in mood, habit and diet. Some early “red flags” for common mental illnesses include:

Anxiety. Yes, people get anxious before a big presentation or exam but signs of a more serious issue could be at play when these worries or fears interfere with everyday life. Look for long periods of intense worry, physiological responses like shaking, muscle tension, rapid heart rate, dizziness, perspiration, cold hands and feet, shortness of breath and insomnia. Absences during events where peak performance is needed can also point to an anxiety disorder—the most common mental health challenge out there.

Depression. This isn’t just a case of feeling sad or having the “blues”. If the state of sadness lasts two weeks or more then there is most likely a serious underlying problem. Everyday tasks may become impossible because the person feels completely unmotivated, exhausted (often because they’re having trouble sleeping) or seems to have lost complete interest in activities they once enjoyed. Other common signs of depression include a change in eating habits and social withdrawal.

Bipolar disorder is a condition of extreme emotional highs and lows that aren’t just passing “mood swings”. Manic or depressed phases can last days or even months. During these extremes of mania (highs) and depression (lows), it’s near impossible to function normally—whether the person is

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completely withdrawn and won't leave bed, or can't sleep or sit still because their thoughts are continually racing.

Supporting Someone with a Mental Health Issue

A friend or family member dealing with a mental illness can also take a toll on your own physical and emotional health. The best way to cope is to arm yourself with knowledge.
Ensure you:

Stay supportive. The first reaction of many loved ones is to try to solve the problem or say things like "don't worry". You'll definitely be more helpful by being available and supportive than trying to take away the illness or distress. And minimizing the situation will only slow the recovery down and possibly close off the lines of communication. Instead, focus on listening to what your loved one is really saying, reserve judgment and offer words of empathy and encouragement. If your loved one hasn't already, suggest they seek help from an objective professional. Doing this can remove some of the stigma associated with mental health support.

Educate yourself. Read books and investigate websites on mental illness so you better understand the situation and can more effectively deal with your own concerns or frustrations. The more you know, the more helpful you'll be to your loved one.

Get help yourself. The more emotionally and physically healthy you are, the more supportive you'll be. Build a support system of your own to make sure you can be around for your loved one for as long as they need you. Whether it's a friend, counselor or spiritual advisor, find an objective person you can confide in, vent to and glean insights from. Just make sure whoever you do talk to can keep the exchanges confidential and does not pose any potential conflicts of interest with your loved one.

Keep it real (and sometimes fun). No one wants to discuss their problems all the time; we need to laugh, socialize and engage in everyday activities—whether it's going to lunch, meeting up for a movie or chatting over coffee. Try not to let the illness dominate every conversation or stand in the way of a good time. Let your loved one take the lead—if they want to talk about their illness, listen. But if they just want to hang out and gossip about the latest Hollywood star allow them the freedom to do so.

Did you know?

- Approximately eight percent of adults will experience a major depression at some time in their lives.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) reports major depressive disorder or bipolar disorder as the leading cause of disability in the US and Canada.

**Name has been changed.*