

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

Under the radar: Detecting mental illness

Recently your usually chipper, social co-worker has started keeping to himself and acting cool and aloof; or perhaps your normally laid-back sister seems unusually restless, hyper and unable to get a good night's sleep. While you may want to blame these behaviors on a "bad day," they've gone on for weeks now. Sound familiar?

A big part of the problem in treating mental health issues, is that detecting and diagnosing them can be downright tricky because signs and symptoms might not be that obvious at first. The result? People facing mental health issues can suffer needlessly for months, or even years, before getting the medical care they need. Mental illnesses are not always noticed because of:

Stigma. Many people still believe, incorrectly, that those suffering from mental illness are responsible for causing the problem and can control it if they wanted to. As a result, many of those coping with a mental illness try to mask their condition, sometimes through the use of drugs or alcohol, instead of seeking help. The stigma also makes it hard for friends or family members to admit there's problem.

Mistaking the symptoms. Because some of the symptoms—e.g., stress and sadness—are more extreme examples of emotions everyone feels occasionally, friends and family members may confuse a more serious problem with normal behavior. Also, mental illnesses often develop slowly, so the symptoms might not seem noticeable at first.

Denial. One characteristic of those dealing with mental illness is that they don't always believe they have a problem. Just as someone may ignore the common signs of heart disease, or chalk them up to a stressful day, a person with bipolar disorder might truly believe—and let others know—he or she is perfectly fine, making treatment more difficult.

Warning Signs. So how can you tell if you or someone you care about has a mental health concern? Early signs to look for include:

- Sudden unexplained mood changes
- Loss of interest in hobbies and social withdrawal
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol
- Unexplained physical changes—such as weight gain or loss
- Loss of confidence
- Problems thinking clearly

Seeking Support

If any of these symptoms sound familiar, it's important to seek out professional support immediately. Early detection of mental illness can not only minimize its impact, but in many cases, can also improve the chances of recovery.

Where do I start?

You may want to make an appointment with your family doctor who can assess the condition and refer you to a mental health professional when needed if you or a loved one is having trouble coping emotionally or mentally.

How long will it take to find out what's wrong?

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Depending on the specific symptoms and people involved, assessment and diagnosis may happen on the first visit, or could take several appointments and specialists to determine. Though a longer wait and multiple referrals can sometimes be a frustrating reality of the process, remember that a proper diagnosis can help map out a more effective treatment plan in the long run.

While mental illnesses can dramatically affect the life of the sufferer and loved ones, the reality is that, if caught early on, treatments can and do work. If you suspect you or someone you know may be struggling with a mental illness, seek professional help—through a counselor, physician or other resource—as quickly as possible. As with any illness, the sooner mental health concerns are dealt with, the better the chances of a swift recovery.