

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

Red Flags: Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health Challenges

A death in the family, the end of a relationship, a midlife crisis: life is full of challenging times that can affect our emotional and mental well-being. Though many mental health issues are triggered by stressful life events, others seem to "come out of nowhere." Regardless of the cause, spotting the signs and accepting that you or a loved one is suffering from a mental illness can be incredibly difficult, especially in a culture where we often try to "mask" negative emotions and "put on a brave face."

Another challenge is that it's sometimes difficult to distinguish between a "normal" reaction to a tough situation, and trouble signs that raise the red flag for mental health concerns. While your assessment of the situation may partly be based on instinct (i.e., you feel that the person's response isn't quite right), if you've noticed any of the symptoms below for an extended period of time, it's probably time to seek or suggest professional mental health support.

Sudden, unexplained mood changes. While we all feel sad or happy at different points in our lives, those with bipolar disorder or depression experience changes in mood that strike suddenly with no apparent cause and can last for long periods of time. If someone you know seems depressed without any change for over a week, he or she might be suffering from moderate or more serious depression. Likewise, a long period of being excessively happy and energetic, in combination with a lack of sleep, racing thoughts and sped-up activities, could be signs of bipolar disorder.

Unable to handle minor problems and daily activities. If small concerns are sending you or a loved one into an emotional tailspin, or if you find it difficult to get out of bed and get to work or to run errands, something more serious may be going on. When a reaction to the loss of a loved one or a broken relationship spirals into not being able to function in day-to-day life, it can suggest that deeper troubles are on the horizon.

Loss of interest in hobbies and social withdrawal. In many cases when people develop a mental illness they will suddenly stop participating in activities that were very important to them in the past. They may also go out of their way to avoid social gatherings with friends and family, preferring to spend more time on their own.

Excessive use of drugs or alcohol. Instead of seeking professional help, many people battling a mental illness will try to mask their symptoms by "self-medicating" and using large amounts of drugs or alcohol. Not only is this an unhealthy way to cope with mental illness, it actually makes the problem worse. If your loved one's drinking or drug use has suddenly become excessive, it's important to seek professional help as soon as possible.

Unexplained physical changes. Most people grappling with a mental illness show physical symptoms. These can include sudden weight gain or loss, unexplained chronic physical pain, headaches or digestive problems.

Loss of confidence. One of the most devastating effects of mental illness is that it robs people of their self-confidence and positive feelings of self-worth. As a result, people struggling with a moderate or serious mental illness may make comments like, "I'm worthless," or, "It would be better for everyone if I wasn't here."

© 2026 Merpati Shepherd Ltd

Strange or over-elaborate ideas. This is not to be mistaken with ambition or a decision to change careers. Thoughts that would not be considered appropriate to discuss with friends and family, or a pursuit of fantasy in an effort to avoid daily life could signal instability.

Problems thinking clearly. Trouble organizing or presenting thoughts in a clear way can also signal mental health challenges. Those unsuccessfully coping with mental illness may have trouble staying on topic during a conversation, or might be unable to explain their ideas properly.

False beliefs, delusions or hallucinations. While not everyone with a mental illness experiences these symptoms, they are common in people suffering from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. If someone you know makes constant claims about things you know aren't true, or talks about people or situations that don't exist, a mental illness could likely be the cause.

Talk about suicide. If a loved one starts making comments about suicide, such as, "I should probably kill myself," or, "It would be better if I just died," you need to take it seriously and seek medical help immediately. These comments may be paired with risky or reckless behavior and attempts by the person to put his or her affairs in order.

Short-lived feelings of isolation, sadness, loneliness or distress are all part and parcel of the human experience, helping us cope and move on from life's more traumatic experiences. But when these emotions remain unchanged over time and start to interfere with day-to-day tasks and overall well-being, they could be signs of mental illness. If you spot these signs in yourself or a loved one, don't ignore them. Instead seek out support from a professional—your physician, a counselor, etc.—to get the help and resources needed to bring balance, health and happiness back to life.