

Spring 1992

Editor's note: May is Mental Health Month.

LEARN TO RECOGNIZE SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

DALLAS -- Kim, 33, wishes someone had realized when she was a child that her mother needed help with a severe mental illness. Kim's growing years were filled with fear, embarrassment and anxiety. She never knew what to expect as her mother alternated between periods of extreme elation and suicidal lows.

Now that Kim's mother is receiving psychiatric care, including medication, for severe manic-depressive illness, life is better not only for the mother, but for everyone in the family. "It's too bad that she couldn't have been like this when I was growing up," Kim says. "I carry lots of resentments toward her--even now when our relationship is much better and I know it wasn't her fault. But I've learned there are some people who have mental problems from birth. They don't know what it is to feel good or to be happy. Wouldn't that be awful?"

Unfortunately, Kim's experience is common, said Dr. Kenneth Z. Altshuler, Stanton Sharp Professor of Psychiatry and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. According to the American Psychiatric Association, at some time in their lives, one in five Americans falls prey to mental illnesses severe enough to interfere with the quality of life.

The direct cost of mental illness--including substance abuse--in our country totals \$66.7 billion a year. Indirect costs, such as lost

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employee time, reduced productivity, criminal activity, motor accidents and welfare programs push the total to more than \$273 billion annually. And no one can put a price tag on the suffering of those affected, their friends and family members.

Equally unfortunate, said Altshuler, is the pervasive lack of knowledge about mental disorders. A recent survey by the National Mental Health Association showed that 43 percent of adults in this country perceive mental illness as a personality weakness. And all too often people do not realize that these illnesses are not only treatable but that most people get better with treatment, he said.

It may sound simplistic, but the first step to recovery is realizing that there is a problem, Altshuler said. He advised watching for "clues" in your own or another's behavior.

"Generally, when someone behaves or reacts in a way in which there is a major discrepancy between the person's behavior and the reality of the situation, one should be concerned," the psychiatrist said. "An extreme example might be a mother's carrying on as though nothing had happened following the death of her child." Overreacting to events could be a danger signal as well.

Another warning sign is faulty thinking, Altshuler said. If a person perceives every event in his or her life as bad or negative when this is not the case it is often a sign of depression, for example. (See sidebar listing other behaviors that may indicate mental or emotional trouble.)

As hard as it may be to recognize the signs of mental illness in a friend or family member, it can be even more difficult to try to ascertain if you yourself need treatment, Altshuler said. However, there are certain indications that you may need a psychiatric evaluation. These include feelings of anxiety; experiencing trembling, quivering or heart palpitations; irritability; sleep problems, including

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insomnia or sleeping too much; increased or decreased energy; feeling a need to talk too much; a feeling that the world looks different; feelings of detachment; a constant feeling of sadness, hopelessness or helplessness; and crying spells.

When professional help is needed, Altshuler is deeply concerned that people get the right kind. "I cannot overemphasize how vital it is to get proper help," he said. "With the vast medical advances in our understanding of illness, most people with mental or emotional problems can be helped. When seeking help for these problems, get good advice, then think it through and follow it."

The psychiatrist offers the following tips:

*First, get a thorough physical examination. Many problems that appear mental may actually be caused by a physical illness or a reaction to medication. Some physical disorders produce symptoms that may be confused with mental illness, including thyroid conditions, brain tumors, endocrine problems and epilepsy, as well as Alzheimer's disease or strokes.

*If the problem does not seem related to physical illness, ask your personal physician for a recommendation to a mental health professional he or she knows and has worked with. "If your doctor is uncertain, contact the local Mental Health Association or the nearest academic medical center," Altshuler said.

*Ask your doctor to help you understand the different kinds of mental health professionals and the types of treatment they offer, such as medication, psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. Consider the seriousness and type of problem and talk with your physician about whether a psychologist or a psychiatrist would be most helpful. Getting an accurate diagnosis is vital before you can receive appropriate treatment. Medication is often necessary and such prescriptions require medical/psychiatric expertise. And remember that most problems do not require

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hospitalization but can be treated on an outpatient basis.

*Be cautious about using the Yellow Pages, TV ads or billboards as a referral source for help with mental health problems. Consult only telephone referral services sponsored by academic medical centers or other reputable non-profit organizations such as the Mental Health Association.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.

(See sidebar -- next page)

Signs and symptoms of Mental Illness

- *Discrepancy between behavior and the reality of the situation
- *Faulty, often negative, thinking
- *Alcohol or drug abuse (including prescription drugs)
- *Temper tantrums, especially in adults
- *Social withdrawal
- *Decreased concentration or the loss of ability to concentrate on work or studies
- *Bizarre behavior, such as hiding, hoarding or collecting things of no obvious use or value
- *Delusional ideas
- *More forgetting than normal for age
- *Unreliability in a previously reliable person
- *Slowed reaction time in performing tasks
- *Increasing memory lapses
- *Ritualistic behavior
- *Changes in sleep habits (falling asleep when inappropriate, sleeping too much or too little)
- *Loss of interest in pastimes previously enjoyed
- *Feelings of anxiety
- *Irritability
- *Increased or decreased energy
- *Talking too much and too fast
- *Feelings that the world looks different/feelings of detachment
- *Constant feeling of sadness, hopelessness or helplessness
- *Crying spells

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