



The Hidden Costs of Mental Illness

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

In the past 100 years mental health treatment has come a long way. Today, we not only have a better understanding of the origin and causes of mental health disorders, but we have the ability to treat these disorders effectively.

Today we have numerous therapies and medications that can help individuals manage the symptoms of mental illness.

But even though effective treatment is available, many people still don't access it. This year, there will be about 50 million people who could benefit from mental health treatment yet only about 10 million will actually seek it.

Why is that?

Before answering this question, let's first determine the scope of the problem.

Who Needs Treatment?

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), in a one-year period, about 50 million Americans can be diagnosed with a mental health problem that is serious enough to interfere with their normal, daily functioning. That's 22 percent of the population.

To be even more specific...

- Some 8 to 14 million Americans suffer from depression each year. About one in five persons will suffer at least one episode of major depression in their lifetimes.
- About 12 million children under 18 suffer from mental disorders such as autism, depression, and hyperactivity.
- About 2 million Americans suffer from schizophrenic disorders.
- Nearly one-fourth of the elderly suffer some form of mental illness.
- About 20 percent of the complaints for which Americans seek medical care are related to anxiety disorders, such as panic attacks, phobias, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

According to a study by the World Health Organization in 2001, when comparing all diseases, mental illness ranks first in terms of causing disability in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. This study revealed that mental illness accounts for 25% of all disability in major industrialized countries.

The Cost of Treatment

As noted by the APA, the direct cost of treating and supporting mental illness is approximately \$55 billion a year. But there are indirect costs to society as well, including the cost of lost employment or decreased productivity, accidents, and social welfare programs, which have been estimated at \$273 billion a year.

About \$70 billion of that \$273 billion is the estimated cost of untreated mental illness. That's actually more than the direct cost of treating mental illness.

Included in the \$70 billion are:

- The added cost of emergency room care. Individuals with untreated mental illness tend to use emergency rooms on a regular basis to deal with medical crises.
- Added costs of care by private physicians. Because many symptoms of mental illness are physical, family doctors hear complaints from patients with untreated mental illness. The problem is, they often refer these patients for more tests, which are costly. In addition, untreated mental illness actually causes some medical conditions to worsen, such as asthma, arthritis, and diabetes, which require even more visits to private physicians.
- Absenteeism. Lost days from work create a financial drain on employers.
- "Presenteeism." This term has been used to refer to employees who show up for work but, because they're impaired with a mental illness such as depression, they cannot work up to their ability.

An interesting study has been conducted concerning these last two problems. A Rand Corporation report showed that, if employers invested \$500 per year per employee for mental health services, it would more than pay for itself in increased productivity of their employees.

Who Comes for Treatment?

Surprisingly, just one in five people with diagnosable mental illness actually attends treatment for it. This rate appears even worse for children. Somewhere between 4 percent and 15 percent of children with severe mental illness are receiving treatment.

Here are the percentages of people now in treatment by type of mental health disorder they have:

- 50% of those with schizophrenia
- 25% of those with anxiety disorders
- 33% of those with depression

But it has been proven that, by participating in treatment, 80% to 90% of people with these disorders can recover and begin functioning better in their daily activities and in their relationships with others. So why don't more people seek treatment? The most obvious explanation is "stigma."

The Stigma of Mental Illness

As a society, how do we view mental illness? Often with disdain, discomfort, or fear. Often we ridicule those who suffer from various mental health disorders.

That's the stigma of mental illness, the negative attitude that many people share.

Our culture promulgates negative views of mental illness. We hear terms like "crazy," "insane," and "psycho" as put-downs. Children learn these names and start using them at an early age.

The media doesn't help either. Television shows and movies often depict people with mental health disorders as unattractive or undesirable, as silly or scary.

In addition, the media often portray mentally ill people as those who commit violence. This is not true. Studies show that those with mental health disorders are no more likely to commit violent crimes than people in the general population.

The negative image needs to change. Someday perhaps, we'll be as accepting when talking about people with mental health disorders as we are today when talking about people with cancer or heart disease. By changing our attitudes about mental illness, we'll pave the way to a saner world.

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