



How to Know if You Need Mental Health Care

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Each year in America, about 26% of us experience mental health symptoms that are serious enough to qualify as a mental health disorder. That means about one in four of us will have some type of impairment this year.

Could you be one of them?

Sometimes it's obvious. We know when we're having problems. But sometimes, it's not so easy to tell. Here are some guidelines to help you determine how serious your condition is and whether psychotherapy could be a helpful tool for you.

Signs and Symptoms

The first sign is a general one. If you just “don't feel good” or if you're feeling that something about you is “just not right,” or something is different and you don't like it, that's a sign.

Your instinct is usually correct. Something is happening that you want to change. But how do you figure out what is going on, and what to do? There are a number of online screening tools that can help you assess yourself in terms of the most common emotional concerns – anxiety and depression. Try, for example, the “Mental Health Screen” at mentalhealthamerica.net.

To do an effective self-screening, look at all four main areas of psychological life: emotions, thoughts, behavior (actions,) and physical / bodily experiences. It's worth looking at these main areas from two perspectives: Are you noticing the changes or concerns yourself, or are others telling you that they are seeing something about you that is a concern?

If you have emotions that feel uncomfortable to you, emotions that happen often, and if it is disrupting your life, that is a problem. We all feel emotions like sadness, anger, fear, guilt, and embarrassment, and we all have to learn to deal with these feelings. It is okay to feel them, and actually would be unhealthy not to, but if the intensity or the frequency becomes too great, we can spend all our time dealing with the feelings and not have enough time living our lives. If you're feeling this way, that's a strong indicator that you have a mental health problem, and that treatment can help.

Also, evaluate your thinking. What type of thoughts are you having? If your thoughts seem frightening, unreal, unclear, or if they are racing, this is a sign. If you're having thoughts that bother you in any way and you cannot seem to shake them, this often means that you could be helped by learning some different ways to deal with these thoughts. There are many books available that provide helpful hints, but psychotherapy, especially cognitive therapy, can be exceptionally effective.

Or if there are changes in some aspect of your daily activities, the way you live your life, especially your physical actions that are observable to others, this could be a sign too. Look for changes such as not being able to sleep or sleeping too much, changes in eating (too much or too little), becoming quick to startle, withdrawing from others, talking too much or too loudly, or acting more nervous, tense or uptight. These signs could indicate that there's a psychological issue that you may or may not be aware of, and your behavior change in showing that you are reacting to it.

Another area to check is the physiological. Are you noticing any periods increased heart rate, sweating, rapid breathing, or lack of energy that is not due to physical activity or exertion? These physiological experiences can indicate emotional discomfort. Because physical changes like this are more often due to a medical condition, it is very important to see your doctor and be checked out for any physical health problems. Many physical ailments can also bring on mental health problems. But if your doctor cannot find any medical issues, the problem could be psychological, so psychotherapy could help.

It helps also to be aware of what others are telling you. Sometimes another person can see your problems more clearly than you can. If someone close to you, a family member or friend, notices a change in your behavior, be sure to hear them out. Often we deny or minimize our own problems, or not notice changes occurring within ourselves yet these can be obvious to those who know us and are used to our normal routine.

Finding Help

So what can you do if you suspect that you have a mental health problem?

First, be sure to call for help. Call a mental health clinic or a psychotherapist in private practice. With either, you will be given a "mental health screening" in which your problems will be evaluated by a professional.

Then if it is determined that you have issues that need to be addressed, you will work on a plan for treatment. This plan will most likely include mental health therapy that will help you find ways to change your thoughts, your emotions, and your behaviors. The plan may also include one or more mental health medications that can be prescribed to help you make needed changes.

When medication is recommended, you will achieve the best outcomes by also going for mental health therapy. That's because, in therapy, you'll learn ways to change how you think and feel, and to change what you do. The medication will help change your neurochemistry but not give you any behavior-change techniques.

Some people choose not to do anything when confronting mental health issues. They might try to ignore their problems or deny them, or simply hope that things will get better. Sometimes this works. Your problems can fade away or you may figure out ways to deal with them on our own. But if you don't do anything to facilitate change, your mental health problems could continue and actually become worse.

Many studies have proven the value of mental health care. When individuals obtain the mental health care they need, it improves the quality of their life and also that of their family and friends. It also improves their overall health and enhances their performance at work or in school.

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