

Taking the First Step

What does it take to get you to the doctor for a physical health issue? Maybe not much. A bad cough and fever might be enough, or a new pain that has you worried, or maybe a broken bone.

But what if you've noticed a troubling change in your mood, sleep patterns, work habits, gambling, drinking, or relationships? What if you start thinking about committing suicide? These are times when you should ask for help.

But for many people going to a company employee assistance program (EAP) or making an appointment with a therapist is hard to do.

Maybe it's a feeling that you need to handle your problems alone. Maybe you're embarrassed about talking about your feelings. Maybe you're worried that the therapist will judge you or tell your boss or family that you've been to their office.

Causes of Mental Illness

Advances in education and research have helped our understanding of mental illnesses, and the success of treatments. Experts now believe that mental illnesses are likely the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. A person with such an imbalance may inherit the condition, or it could be brought on by stress, drug misuse, or changes in your chemical makeup due to pregnancy, medicines, menopause, or aging.

Mental illnesses can cause many types of behaviors such as great sadness and irritability, and in serious cases, hallucinations and withdrawal. These behaviors cannot be changed at will and many times are out of your control.

The good news is that people with mental illnesses do get better and get back to normal life when they get the right support and care.

Employee Privacy

Employees are protected by laws, both as to privacy and nondiscrimination. If you don't know these laws, ask your employer. If your company offers an EAP, you can talk privately with an expert who can help you sort through your concerns and direct you to the right support.

Like any health issue, seeking help is best done early.

Understanding the Therapy Process

Some may be held back by false notions about the therapy process, says Tina Tessina, Ph.D., a licensed therapist. "People come into my office looking so scared," she says. She says people are afraid of their own feelings, and of what might happen if they admit them. They think, "If I ever start crying, I'll never stop. If I let myself express my anger, I'll do real damage."

Patricia A. Farrell, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and author, says people also might have fears about the sessions themselves. Therapy in an EAP, for example, isn't a deep probe into childhood traumas and inner thoughts. It's more like a short series of problem-solving sessions, focused on certain behaviors or



thought patterns and learning techniques to change them. “A lot of therapy is two people working together for the best outcome for that person,” she says. “It’s more like learning how to do things a little better ... You go out and you try something and you come back to talk about it.”

This type of therapy works well on issues that haven’t yet become job- or life-threatening crises.

The Danger of Waiting

Farrell says it’s time to get help “when something is causing disruption in your life on an almost daily basis ... and it seems to have gone on for a couple of weeks.”

And with thoughts of committing suicide, the risk of not getting help in time is far worse than a lost job or relationship. Farrell says planning for suicide is a red alert. Any time a person starts hoarding medicine or thinking about a suicidal act in other concrete terms, “you better have an immediate plan to get help.”

Telling another person about your issue is the first step to solving it, moving toward a healthier mental wellbeing.

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