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What is mental illness? A mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, behaviors and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illnesses can be influenced by our environments, past events, trauma, and biology. There are many different kinds of mental illnesses--you've probably heard of some of them, like depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or eating disorders, to name a few.

Common warning signs in adults and adolescents:

- ♥ Excessive worrying or fear
- ♥ Feeling excessively sad or low
- ♥ Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- ♥ Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria
- ♥ Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- ♥ Avoiding friends and social activities
- ♥ Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- ♥ Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite
- ♥ An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- ♥ Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- ♥ Changes in sex drive
- ♥ Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that are not actually present)
- ♥ Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior or personality
- ♥ Overuse of alcohol or drugs
- ♥ Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing "aches and pains")
- ♥ Thinking about hurting oneself or of suicide
- ♥ Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress

Suggestions for helping a friend or family member when you see concerning signs:

- ♥ ***Start the Conversation.*** "Tell me more about what's happening. Maybe if I understand better, we can find a solution together."
  "It worries me to hear you talking like this. Let's talk to someone about it."
  "I've noticed you're [sleeping more, eating less, etc.], I'm here if you need to talk."
- ♥ ***Offer Support.*** "I really want to help, what can I do to help you right now?"
  "Would you like me to go with you to a support group or a meeting?"
  "Let's sit down together and look for places to get help. I can go with you too."
- ♥ ***Be a friend.*** Learn more about mental health conditions.
  Tell your friend it gets better; help and support are out there.
  Avoid saying things like "you'll get over it," "toughen up" or "you're fine".
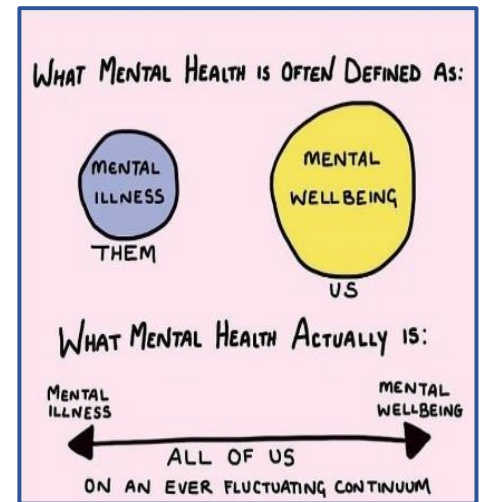

What can help a person with a mental illness? Mental illnesses are different for everyone. For some people, mental illnesses can affect them for a short time in their lives. Or symptoms can come and go. Other times, mental illnesses can last for years or even a lifetime. But no matter what a person may be experiencing, mental illness is treatable. There are things that help people feel better, including lifestyle changes, counseling or therapy, support groups, and sometimes medication. Like other illnesses, treating mental illnesses early can help a person get better faster.

Stigma: Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, religion or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing. *"Stigma"* is when someone *views* another person in a negative way because they have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that's thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage. Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a mental health condition are common. Stigma can lead to discrimination--when someone *treats* another person in a negative way because of their mental illness. A person with a mental illness may even judge themself.

Some of the harmful effects of stigma can include:
- ♥ Reluctance to seek help or treatment.
- ♥ Lack of understanding by family, friends, co-workers or others.
- ♥ Fewer opportunities for work, school or social activities or trouble finding housing.
- ♥ Bullying, physical violence or harassment.
- ♥ Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover your mental illness treatment.
- ♥ The belief that you'll never succeed at certain challenges or that you can't improve your situation.

Challenging stigma associated with mental illness: Everyone has a role to play in creating a mentally healthy community – one that is inclusive, rejects discrimination and supports recovery.
- ♥ Learn the facts about mental illness and share them with family, friends, work colleagues, and classmates.
- ♥ Get to know people with personal experiences of mental illness so you learn to see them for the person they are rather than their illness.
- ♥ Don't judge, label, or discriminate when you meet people with mental illness. Treat all people with respect and dignity.
- ♥ Avoid using language that puts the illness first and the person second. Say 'a person with bipolar disorder' rather than 'that person is bipolar'.
- ♥ Say something when you hear people around you making stereotypical or inaccurate comments about mental illness.
- ♥ Share your own experience of mental illness (if you have experienced it). This will help dispel myths and encourage others to do the same. Mental illness is not something shameful that needs to be hidden.

Area mental health resources:
- ▪ NAMI Golden Plains: https://namikansas.org/nami-hays-2/
- ▪ Take a mental health screening: https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/
- ▪ High Plains Mental Health Center 24/7 crisis hotline: **(800) 432-0333**
- ▪ Suicide and Crisis Hotline: Dial **988**
- ▪ Compassionate Ear Warmline (non-crisis helpline): **866-WARM-EAR (866-927-6327)** 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily
- ▪ CHATLINE-MHA of South Central Kansas (warmline/non-crisis helpline) **316-260-2340** 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily
- ▪ Seven Cups of Tea (online behavioral/emotional health support) https://hpmhc.com/our-programs/7-cups-of-tea/
- ▪ Private practice counselors
  (Sources of information include NAMI, Mental Health America, Mayo Clinic, High Plains Mental Health Center)