

Banishing Mental Illness

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By Mary Isaacs

Mental illnesses or disorders cover a wide range of conditions which affect a person's thoughts, emotions and behaviour so much that they cause suffering to themselves and other people. They include severe anxiety or fear, panic attacks, post traumatic stress, depression, schizophrenia, etcetera.

Many people are affected by mental illness even though the severity varies. Research in Kenyan public hospitals has shown that about half of the people seeking treatment have some degree of depression. If left untreated this condition becomes worse and people are unable to function effectively. Mental disorders are among the top ten causes of disability in Africa.

In Africa, those with mental illness are highly stigmatized and sufferers discriminated against. People think they are being punished for wrong things they have done, or that they are possessed of spirits and demons. This often delays the healing process since many are not given adequate medical care. Many resort to traditional healers and spiritists.

What causes mental illness?

The causes of mental illness vary widely. They include physical, social, environmental and psychological factors. Individual genetic make up makes some people more susceptible to mental illness. Severe head injuries, misuse of drugs, and diet (lack of some vitamins and minerals) have also been related to mental illness. Stress at home or work can cause depression and anxiety and people who do not have a strong support system may find it difficult to cope.

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Some people are also less strong than others psychologically especially if they have self destructive thought patterns and perceptions such as low self esteem. This makes them less able to cope with adverse situations.

Significant events like bereavement, divorce and abuse can also be very traumatic and lead to mental illness if no intervention is available.

For many women, anxiety and depression are the leading mental illness due to gender roles, violence, and the lack of support from their male partners and society.

What can one do to heal or reduce risk of mental illness?

The first step to prevention of mental illness is for one to understand what they are going through and seek early treatment, resolution, or adopt various coping mechanisms.

It is important to note that the well being of a person depends on a holistic approach to health. One needs to be healthy physically, mentally, spiritually and socially. All work to maintain the whole person. If you are healthy physically, it is less easy for depression to set in. So you need to eat a healthy diet and keep your body fit through exercise and regular physical activity.

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You need to keep mentally strong by building your self esteem and developing a positive attitude. This makes one able to cope by facing problems head on and less prone to seek escapist ways such as drug abuse which will only make the problem worse.

You need to keep socially healthy by relating well with your immediate family and the community. This ensures a strong support system that one can depend on when bad things happen.

Most of all, you need to be spiritually healthy through a close relationship with God through whom one can have the power to overcome everything.

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am Your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." □ Isaiah 41:10, NKJV

Yes, be bold and strong in the Lord.

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