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By Mary Isaacs

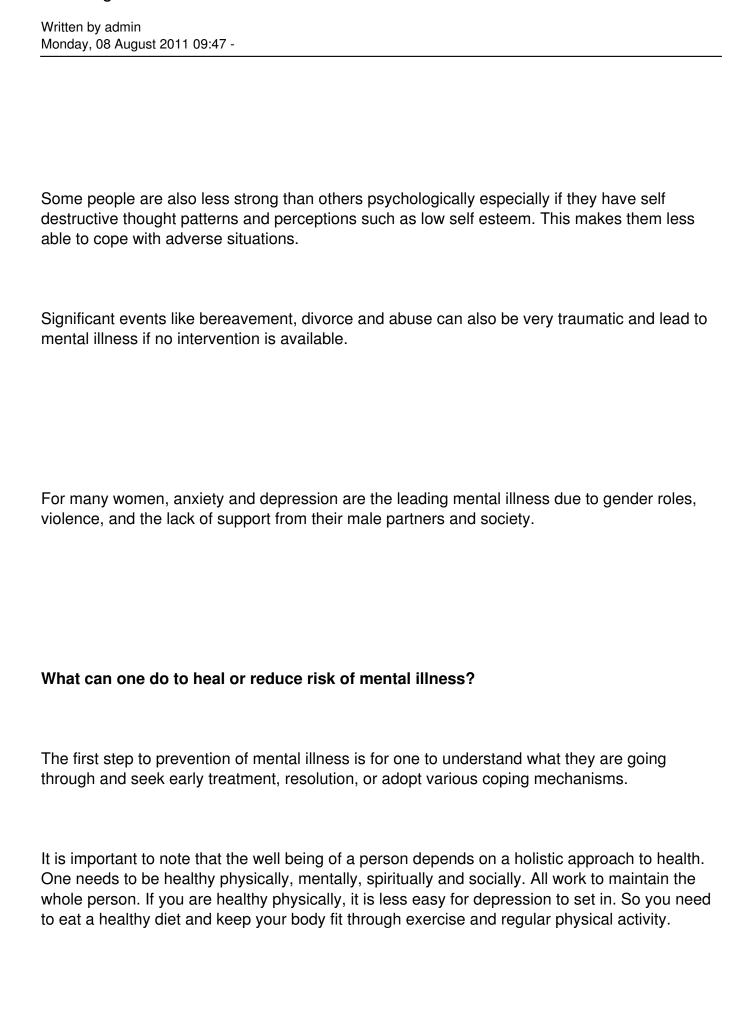
Mental illnesses or disorders cover a wide range of conditions which affect a person's thoughts, emotions and behaviour so much that they cause suffering to themselves and other people. They include severe anxiety or fear, panic attacks, post traumatic stress, depression, schizophrenia, etcetera.

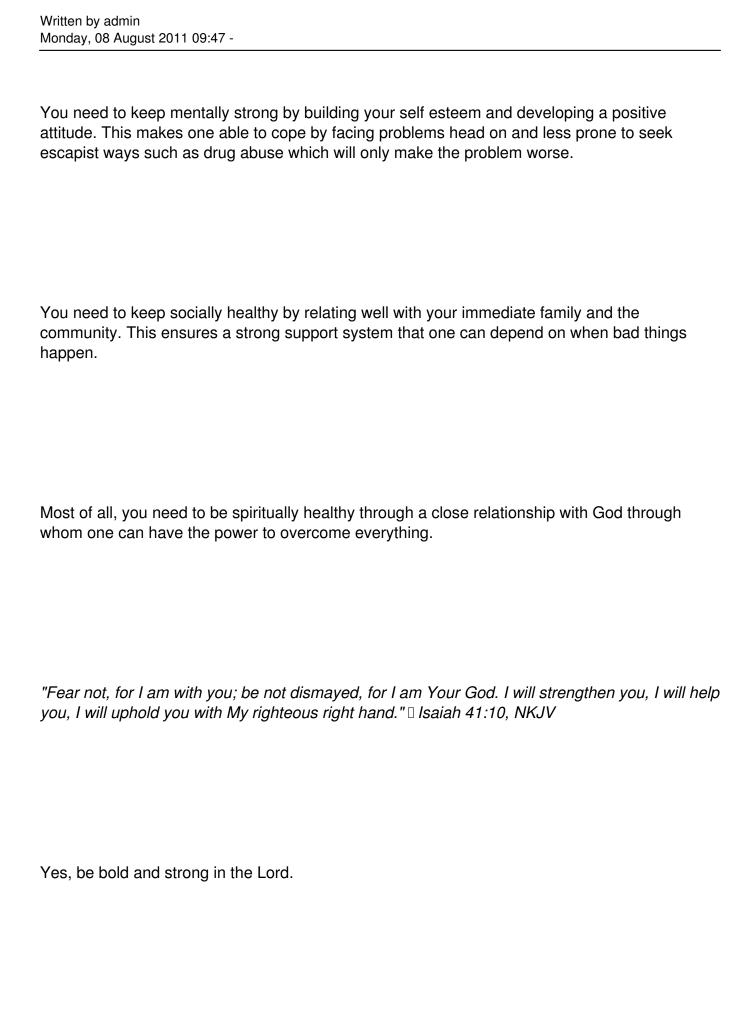
Many people are affected by mental illness even though the severity varies. Research in Kenyan public hospitals has shown that about half of the people seeking treatment have some degree of depression. If left untreated this condition becomes worse and people are unable to function effectively. Mental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

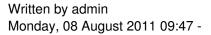
In Africa, those with mental illness are highly stigmatized and sufferers discriminated against. People think they are being punished for wrong things they have done, or that they are possessed of spirits and demons. This often delays the healing process since many are not given adequate medical care.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