

After a *Diagnosis*



What You Need to Know

You may just have been diagnosed with a mental illness, or you may have already begun treatment. Either way, you're probably experiencing a range of emotions. For some people, receiving a

diagnosis can be a relief, finally being able to put a name to a problem. For others, it can be a major blow. You may experience fear, anger, denial, shame or sadness. You may be wondering, "Why did this happen to me?" "How will this affect my life? What will people think of me?"

Being told that you have a mental illness is not the end of the world. With help and support, you can recover and achieve your life's ambitions. Of course, you will face many challenges as you begin your treatment, but there is hope. Mental illnesses are manageable. And there are a number of things you can do for yourself after a diagnosis to cope with the news, keep up with your treatment, and support your own recovery.

1. Be hopeful.

Above all else, it's important to maintain a positive outlook. Here are a few things to keep in mind throughout your treatment and recovery.

- You are not alone in this experience. Mental illnesses are common, affecting one in every five Americans.
- You can improve and achieve your goals. Today, many people who are diagnosed with serious mental illnesses are managing their conditions and regaining control of their lives.
- You can and should play an active role in your treatment. And the more informed you are about your illness and treatment options, the better you'll be able to direct your recovery.

2. Get emotional support.

An important step in coping with a diagnosis is to find emotional support. Talk to friends and family members you feel close to and trust. They care about you and want to help you recover. Discuss your feelings about the diagnosis and any treatments or services that have been recommended. Don't be afraid to let people know how to help you. This support will be important, both as you begin your recovery and when you have to deal with any setbacks along the way.

Also, you may want to meet people who have already been through what you are currently experiencing. This can help you prepare for what's ahead and help you avoid any problems others may have been through in their recovery. Seek out self-help groups and support organizations that can reduce any feelings of isolation and loneliness.

3. Learn all you can about your diagnosis.

If you're ready, do some research on your particular illness, the recommended treatments and other self-help ideas. The more you learn, the better you'll be in working with your doctor and making decisions that feel right for you.

Again, talk to people who have had similar experiences, or mental health professionals you know and trust. The Internet can be a great resource for information about mental illnesses and treatment options. There are a number of websites, including that of the National Mental Health Association (www.nmha.org), which can give you additional information. However, beware of websites that offer quick fixes or don't reveal their sources.

4. Understand your health care options.

Getting the services you need and paying for them can be a challenge. Your options may be limited by whether or not you have insurance, the type of insurance you have (private, HMO, Medicaid, Medicare), and the amount of coverage it provides for mental health care. There also may be a shortage of mental health professionals where you live, and it can be tough to get an appointment. But, remember, there are options.

- If you're employed and have a health plan, call your health insurer to see if they cover mental health services. Then find out which mental health professionals in your area are willing to accept payment from your insurance plan. If your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), they can also help you find services you can afford.
- If you get health care through a government program like Medicaid or Medicare, you should contact a community mental health center or local health department to see which doctors or programs accept this form of health insurance.
- If you don't have health insurance, ask your community mental health center about reduced-cost (or sliding-scale fee) mental health services.

5. Develop a partnership with your doctor and/or therapist.

Once you have received a diagnosis and are in contact with a doctor or a mental health professional, here's what you need to know about making the most of these relationships from the start.

- Make sure it's the right fit for you. If possible, interview multiple providers; don't be afraid to meet with more than one. You'll want to find a doctor, mental health professional or peer counselor with whom you can relate. Ask them about their style of treatment and experiences helping other people with your particular illness.
- Be open with your doctor or therapist. Share how you're really feeling. Go to your appointments with a list of questions you may have about your diagnosis and the therapies that are being proposed.
- After starting a course of treatment, you should begin to notice changes: relief from your symptoms, more self-assurance, greater ability to make decisions. You should tell the doctor or therapist about your progress, or if you are having any problems. Don't be afraid to voice your concerns.
- Involve your family and friends in your treatment, if you're comfortable with that. Invite them to accompany you to an appointment or to sit in on a therapy session.

Getting the right help requires perseverance and self-advocacy. Take advantage of the options you have and continue to search for other ways to meet your needs. Remember — getting back to your life is the goal of recovery!

For more information, contact your local Mental Health Association (MHA) or the National Mental Health Association at 800-969-NMHA (6642) or www.nmha.org.



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