



Mental illness

Mental illness is common among nursing home residents, and CNAs must know how to identify these disorders and treat residents suffering from them.

The most common types of mental illness are **cognitive, dissociative, anxiety, mood, personality, and psychotic disorders**.

Mental illness can cause abnormal ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. People with mental illness demonstrate different signs and symptoms, making it difficult to identify and diagnose these disorders.

As a CNA, you must know how to identify the symptoms of mental illness because recognizing these signs is vital to providing proper care to residents.

This issue will teach you about the various types of mental illnesses, **common causes** of these disorders, and **symptoms** to look out for. You will also learn about the **methods of treatment** for mental illness, including medications, therapies, and support groups.

Have a good day of training, and stay tuned for next month's issue of **CNA Training Advisor** on HIV and AIDS.

PROGRAM PREP

Program time

Approximately 30 minutes

Learning objectives

Participants in this activity will learn:

- The common symptoms of mental illness
- How to recognize the types of mental illness
- The methods of treatment for mental illness

Preparation

- Review the material on pp. 2–4
- Duplicate the **CNA Professor** insert for participants
- Gather equipment for participants (e.g., an attendance sheet, pencils, etc.)

Method

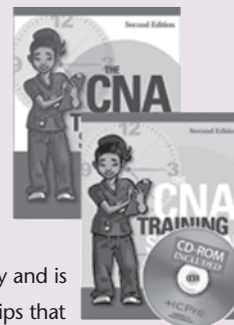
1. Place a copy of **CNA Professor** and a pencil at each participant's seat
2. Conduct the questionnaire as a pretest or, if participants' reading skills are limited, as an oral posttest
3. Present the program material
4. Review the questionnaire
5. Discuss the answers

About your CNA training advisor

Judith Ryan, RN, BSN, is the senior advisor for **CNA Training Advisor**. She is the director of staff development at Abbott House, a 55-bed nursing home in Lynn, MA. Ryan has been a nurse for 20 years. As part of her job, she is responsible for conducting in-services on a wide range of topics for CNAs.

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MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental health problems are common among the elderly, chronically ill, disabled, and the poor.

Since people with mental illness can demonstrate many symptoms, others often do not recognize the signs. As a result, many people do not receive the medications or treatments that might help. CNAs should know how to recognize mental illness and care for mentally ill residents.

Mental illness is a brain disorder that causes abnormal ways of thinking, acting, or feeling.

Symptoms of abnormal thinking include:

- **Delusions.** This means believing things that are not true. A person might think someone wants to harm him or her.
- **Hallucinations.** This means seeing or hearing things that are not really there. A person who is hallucinating might hear people talking to him or her when no one is.
- **Confused thinking.** The person might be illogical or not understand things happening around him or her.
- **Suicidal thoughts.** Someone with a mental illness might have frequent or constant thoughts of killing him- or herself.

Symptoms of abnormal behavior include:

- Disruptive or antisocial actions
- Changes in sleeping routines
- Changes in eating habits
- Alcohol, drug, or medicine abuse
- Very slow or fast speech or movements
- Changes in hygiene practices
- Unwillingness to cooperate
- Inability to pay attention (easily distracted)
- Withdrawal from normal activities or people
- Agitated behavior or fits of temper

Symptoms of abnormal feelings include:

- Frequent mood changes
- Depression or sadness
- Anxiety, worry, or panic
- Irritability or anger
- Frequent crying or tearfulness
- Apathy or poor motivation
- Hopeless or helpless feelings
- Extremely low or high self-esteem
- Excessive energy or euphoria
- Poor judgment or impulsiveness

There are many causes of mental illness, such as stressful events, imbalances in the body's chemistry, genetics, or a combination of several factors. The symptoms of mental illness occur because the brain is not functioning properly, which can affect a person's thought processes, emotions, or behavior.

It is important to remember that a mentally ill person usually cannot control the way he or she thinks, feels, or behaves. Mental illness is not the person's fault.

Q What are some common causes of mental illness?

Discuss.

There are many categories of mental disorders, but the most common types are:

- Cognitive
- Dissociative
- Anxiety
- Personality
- Mood
- Psychotic

Cognitive disorders

Cognitive impairment is a loss of mental abilities and awareness that occurs in varying degrees with a variety of underlying causes. In the elderly, it is usually caused by physical changes in the brain. Symptoms include:

- Loss of intellectual abilities
- Personality changes
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Verbal confusion

Two cognitive disorders that are common among nursing home residents are:

- **Dementia.** This disorder involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Healthy brain tissue deteriorates, causing a steady loss in memory and mental abilities. Strokes or changes in the brain's blood supply may result in the death of brain tissue. Symptoms of dementia caused by problems with blood vessels can appear suddenly. Although the disorder is found primarily in the elderly, 50% of people with AIDS develop dementia.
- **Alzheimer's disease.** This is the most common form of dementia among people aged 65 and older. It may begin with slight memory loss and confusion, but it eventually leads to a severe, permanent

Q What are some symptoms of mental illness?

Discuss.

MENTAL ILLNESS

mental impairment that destroys the ability to remember, reason, learn, and imagine. On average, people die within 10 years of getting Alzheimer's.

Dissociative disorders

Dissociative disorders come in many forms and are thought to stem from traumatic events. When an extremely stressful event occurs, the person is too overwhelmed to process it and tries to cope with the trauma by separating him- or herself from the experience. This can lead to loss of memory or the formation of separate personalities. Two types of dissociative disorders are:

- **Dissociative identity disorder.** This disorder is evidenced by two or more personalities or identities that control a person's consciousness at different times. It used to be called multiple personality disorder.
- **Dissociative amnesia.** In this disorder, the person forgets some or all of his or her personal information, such as his or her identity or where he or she lives.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety causes physical symptoms such as rapid shallow breathing, increased heart rate, sweating, and trembling. It can cause emotional symptoms, including alarm, dread, and apprehension. Treatment may include medication, therapy, or a combination. There are many types of anxiety disorders, a few of which are:

- **Panic disorder.** This is a sudden onset of intense fear, apprehension, and impending doom that may last from minutes to hours.
- **Posttraumatic stress disorder.** Persons with this disorder re-experience the anxiety associated with a previous traumatic event. Many times, it is caused by exposure to an extremely stressful event, such as abuse or rape.
- **Phobias.** A person with a phobia feels very anxious when exposed to a particular object or situation, such as a high place. The person fears and avoids whatever causes the anxiety.

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).** OCD is characterized by the need to maintain control, neatness, cleanliness, or perfection. People with OCD feel compelled to perform repetitive acts such as hand washing or checking to make sure a door is locked.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder.** This disorder may occur at any age. It is diagnosed after at least six months of persistent, excessive anxiety and worry.

Personality disorders

Personality disorders are chronic conditions with biological and psychological causes. Psychotherapy is used for treatment, sometimes along with medications. Some common personality disorders are:

- **Borderline personality disorder.** This disorder is characterized by impulsive behavior, unstable relationships, and intense anger. These people may have psychotic thinking, paranoia, and hallucinations.
- **Obsessive-compulsive personality.** These people tend to be high achievers. They are dependable and orderly but can't adjust to change and are intolerant of mistakes. They can be uncomfortable with relationships. This is not the same as OCD.
- **Passive-aggressive personality.** These people hide hostile feelings and try to control or punish others.
- **Narcissistic personality.** People with this personality feel superior and expect admiration. They are seen as self-centered and arrogant.
- **Antisocial personality, formerly called psychopathic or sociopathic personality.** These people show no regard for the rights and feelings of others. They do not tolerate frustration and become hostile or violent. They show no remorse or guilt and blame others for their behavior. They are prone to addictions, sexual deviation, job failures, and abuse. Most are male.

Mood disorders

Mood disorders usually involve chemical imbalances in the brain and are often treated with antidepressants or psychotherapy. The most

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MENTAL ILLNESS

common mood disorder among nursing home residents is depression. Depression causes severe, prolonged sadness. It can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, behavior, and physical health. It may develop at any age. Depressed people often look sad or expressionless and lose interest in normal activities. Depression is the leading cause of disability in the United States, affecting more women than men.

Older people often think sadness is part of aging or that forgetfulness, loss of appetite, and insomnia are symptoms of dementia. Depression is not a sign of old age. It is an illness and needs treatment like any other illness.

Psychotic disorders

In acute phases of psychosis, a person loses touch with reality and is unable to meet the ordinary demands of life. Most psychotic episodes are brief.

Schizophrenia is a severe and chronic psychotic disorder that impairs a person's ability to think clearly, make decisions, and relate to others. Persons with this disorder suffer frightening symptoms that leave them fearful and withdrawn.

People with schizophrenia do not have a "split personality." They may have delusions or hallucinations. They cannot tell what is real and what is not. People with this disorder may talk to themselves, walk in circles, pace, and have difficulty carrying on conversations. There may be a lack of facial expression. They may be unable to follow through with activities they start.

Schizophrenia is manageable with medication and psychotherapy. Acute episodes are treated with hospitalization and antipsychotic drugs.

Treatment of mental illness

Mental health disorders are treatable, and many people can recover from them. Anything that improves a person's quality of life, including social events, activities, or reality orientation classes, can be beneficial for residents suffering from mental illness. Many communities and facilities are affiliated with mental health professionals that can screen for mental health problems and conduct therapy sessions.

Some common treatments for mental illness are:

- **Medications.** Many of the medicines used to treat mental illness cause unpleasant side effects. Some of the more common ones are

dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, appetite changes, loss of sexual function, drowsiness, and weight gain. Drinking eight glasses of water per day and eating fruits and vegetables can help with some of these effects. Antipsychotic drugs can cause tremors, stiffness, muscle contraction and rigidity, restlessness, and loss of facial expression. Elderly people and those that have taken these medicines for years sometimes develop a condition called tardive dyskinesia. This causes uncontrolled facial movements and jerking or twisting movements of other body parts. This condition can be treated with medication.

- **Psychotherapy.** Psychotherapy is the use of psychological techniques to change behaviors, feelings, thoughts, or habits. It is recommended for people experiencing emotional distress.
- **Behavior management.** The aim of behavior management is to increase the occurrence of desirable behavior by rewarding the person for acting correctly. Undesirable behavior is reduced by using negative reinforcement.
- **Cognitive therapy.** Cognitive therapy emphasizes a rational and positive view. This therapy attempts to change destructive thought patterns that can lead to disappointment and frustration. It is effective with anxiety and depression.
- **Psychoeducation.** Psychoeducation is teaching people about their illness, treatment, and how to recognize a relapse. Teaching coping skills to family members will help them deal with an ill relative.
- **Electroconvulsive therapy.** This treatment is used only for delusions and hallucinations, major depression, or serious sleep and eating disorders that cannot be effectively treated with drugs. Sedatives are given and low doses of electric shock are applied to the brain. Most people show rapid improvement.
- **Self-help and support groups.** These groups help because members give each other ongoing support. It's comforting to know others have the same or similar problems. These groups can also help families work together for needed research, treatments, and community programs. ■

Q

What are some ways to treat mental illness?

Discuss.

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Group Publisher: **Emily Sheahan**
 Executive Editor: **Elizabeth Petersen**
 Associate Editor: **MacKenzie Kimball**
mkimball@hcpro.com

HCPro

Judith Ryan, RN, BSN
Director of Staff Development
 Abbott House
 Lynn, MA

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MENTAL ILLNESS

Mark the correct response.

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Mental illness is a brain disorder that can cause abnormal ways of _____.
 - a. thinking
 - b. acting
 - c. feeling
 - d. all of the above
2. Hallucinations are symptoms of abnormal _____.
 - a. thinking
 - b. behavior
 - c. feelings
 - d. none of the above
3. What are some common symptoms of abnormal behavior?
 - a. Delusions
 - b. Changes in sleeping routines
 - c. Withdrawal from normal activities
 - d. Both b & c
4. Mental illness is not a person's fault.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. What is a common cognitive disorder among nursing home residents?
 - a. Dissociative identity disorder
 - b. Amnesia
 - c. Alzheimer's disease
 - d. Panic disorder
6. What is the most common mood disorder among elderly residents?
 - a. Depression
 - b. Anxiety
 - c. Hyperactivity
 - d. Bipolar disorder
7. Mood disorders are often treated with _____.
 - a. social interaction
 - b. antidepressants and/or psychotherapy
 - c. physical therapy
 - d. exercise
8. Schizophrenia impairs a person's ability to _____.
 - a. think clearly
 - b. make decisions
 - c. relate to others
 - d. all of the above
9. Anything that can improve a resident's quality of life can help in the treatment of mental illness.
 - a. True
 - b. False
10. Many of the medications used to treat mental illness cause unpleasant side effects.
 - a. True
 - b. False