

What Is Mental Illness?

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Mental illness¹ consists of two kinds of phenomena: First, a state of being which is debilitating, agitating, off-putting, panicky, shut down, insulated, restless, confused, self-deprecating, disorganized and which impacts the ability of the person to live in satisfying ways. Second, it also consists of behavior that is erratic, bizarre, self-defeating, dangerous, strange and scary to others.

Mental illnesses are essentially reactions to concerns that a person has about his or her life situation and ability to live life the way s/he wants to. Mental illnesses are efforts by wounded and frightened psyches to protect themselves, avoid pain, feel more adequate and powerful, gain the illusion of control, find answers to difficult dilemmas and life issues and gain access to inner wisdom that has been blocked by agitation, fear and desperation.

Mental illnesses are signals, wake-up calls that something is not right in the person's life; something needs to be dealt with in a serious, painstaking way. Some kind of healing and reparation needs to take place in order for the person to live the way s/he wants to live.

These states of being and behaviors are not chosen by people in the sense that we use the word "choose". Rather, they are driven by parts of the psyche that are deeper and more essential than the rational part of the psyche.

Why does ISEPP take this view of mental illness when most people believe that mental illnesses are diseases of brain function and genetic dynamics? We understand that biochemistry and genetic dynamics are involved in all human functioning. But those physiological dynamics do not drive human behavior. Human behavior is driven by the desire of human beings to love the way they want to love, work (express themselves) the way they want to work and enjoy life the way they want to enjoy life. When those desires are frustrated, people become "mentally ill".

To think that the states of being and behaviors associated with diagnoses of mental illness are caused by chemical imbalances, genetic dynamics and brain disorders is extremely cynical, harmful and false. It turns human beings into the helpless victims of random physiological processes over which they have no control. That is contrary to

¹ The term "mental illness" is being used in this essay in order to conform to conventional language. However, we do not believe that the states of being which are called "mental illnesses" are illnesses in the same sense that cancer and heart disease are illnesses. We do not believe they are caused by organic pathology.

what we know about human beings. Human beings are not random organisms. Rather, they are meaning making, desiring organisms that live with a purpose.

What about the brain scans that show that the brains of persons diagnosed with mental illnesses are different from the brains of people who aren't diagnosed with mental illnesses? First, none of those findings are clear enough for such scans to be used in the diagnoses of mental illnesses. Second, in fact, the diagnosing of mental illness is done solely on the basis of self-reports and observations of behavior and states of being; neither brain scans nor any other physiological markers are used in diagnosis. Third, such scans merely show that there is an association between certain brain physiology and certain states of being and behaviors. They say nothing about what causes what.

There is also an association between such states of being and behaviors and certain life situations and personality characteristics. Following are some examples:

- Children who have experienced difficult early lives and children who have been adopted are more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).²
- People who have been betrayed by a significant parent figure or who have lost the esteem of a loved person are more likely to experience a manic episode and be diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder.³
- People who derive their self worth from social relationships and who have suffered an interpersonal loss are more likely to be diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder.⁴
- People who have suffered trauma in early life are more likely to be diagnosed with a psychotic disorder.⁵

Human beings have the capacity to control their thoughts, emotions, intentions, perceptions and reactions. Mental illnesses are significant disruptions to these capacities, disruptions involving emotional distress, life crises, difficult dilemmas, spiritual emergencies and overwhelming fear and agitation. Fortunately, these

² Galves, A. and Walker, D. (2012). Debunking the science behind attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder as a "brain disorder". *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry*, 14(1), 27-40

³ Taylor, J. and Morley, S. (2007). Self-organization in bipolar disorder: Compartmentalization and self-complexity. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 31(1), 83-96

⁴ Johnson, S.L. and Roberts, J.E. (1995). Life events and bipolar disorder: Implications from biological theories. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 434-449

⁵ Read, J. and Ross, C.A. (2003). Psychological trauma and psychosis: Another reason why people diagnosed schizophrenic must be offered psychological therapies. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 31, 247-268

capacities also enable them to benefit from all of the forms of psychotherapy which are designed to help them love the way they want to love, work the way they want to work and enjoy life the way they want to enjoy life. This includes traditional psychotherapy as well as mindfulness meditation, yoga, support groups, exercise, nutritional interventions, help with relationships and employment and other forms of personal growth.