

Mental illness affects the lives of millions of people. Some struggle with their own mental illnesses; others cope with the illnesses of friends and families. The impact of a mental illness on a person's life can range from mild to severely debilitating.

- It is difficult to determine the exact number of people with a mental illness, but most studies suggest that mental illnesses are more common than cancer, diabetes, or heart disease. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2016), in 2015 approximately 43.4 million American adults, or 17.9 percent of the population, had some type of mental illness. This number does not include substance use disorders. Other studies have found the percentage to be as high as 32 percent (Baggelman & Napili, 2014).
- Less than half of those who experience a mental health challenge receive treatment (SAMHSA, 2015a). People who reported that they sought treatment but did not receive it listed lack of adequate health insurance as the number-one reason.
- Roughly one in five children ages 5 to 18 currently have, or will have, a mental illness. Fifty percent of mental illness begins by age 14, and the average time between onset of symptoms and treatment is 8 to 10 years (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 2016).
- Recent research suggests that soldiers have a much higher prevalence of mental illness than do members of the civilian population (Kessler et al., 2014). Soldiers reported five times the major depression and 15 times the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder as seen in the general population. Almost 14 percent of soldiers reported considering suicide, 5.3 percent had planned a suicide, and 2.4 percent had made one or more attempts (Nock et al., 2014).
- About one-third of the US homeless population has an untreated, serious mental illness. The percentage is even higher for women and for people who are chronically homeless. Life is extremely difficult for members of this population, resulting in a 4 to 9 times higher mortality rate than the general population (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2016).
- The effectiveness of a variety of treatments for the array of mental and behavioral disorders has been well documented. In fact, treatments improve symptoms and quality of life for 70 to 90 percent of people with a serious mental illness (Kornblum, 2008).
- Mental illness has a tremendous impact on lives worldwide. It is estimated that roughly 10 percent of people globally had a mental illness during the previous year. Almost 30 percent experience mental illness during their lifetime (Steel et al., 2014). Mental illness and substance abuse are the leading causes of disability worldwide. More than 900,000 people commit suicide each year; the majority of whom are between the ages of 15 and 44. Resources to prevent and treat mental illness vary greatly depending on a country's wealth. In low- and middle-income countries there are 0.05 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. The rate in high-income countries is 170 times higher (WHO, 2013).

Evidence suggests that **one in four US adults experiences mental illness** (e.g., depression, anxiety, or eating disorders) during his or her lifetime (SAMHSA, 2016); researchers consider this figure an underestimate (Bektemis, 2014). Many people remain reluctant to tell researchers about their mental health history, mainly because of the stigma attached to mental diseases.



EP 4a, 4c

Mental Health and Mental Illness

Of the five types of mental health professionals in the United States (social workers, clinical psychologists, marriage and family therapists, psychiatrists, advanced practice psychiatric nurses), **social workers provide the majority of the country's mental health services**. According to one estimate by SAMHSA, **more than 50 percent of mental health providers are social workers** (Heister & Baggelman, 2015). Clinical social work has a primary focus on the mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being of individuals, couples, families, and groups. They help people struggling to cope with the problems of daily living and those with serious mental illness. Social workers also engage in efforts to prevent mental illness and advocate for better funding for and access to mental health services.

Almost half of all professional social workers identify mental health as their primary or secondary practice area (National Association of Social Workers, 2011). Social workers are committed to making mental health care and the prevention of mental disorders a national priority. It is an exciting time to be a social worker in the field of mental health. Ongoing scientific discoveries about the functioning of the brain are increasing understanding of effective treatment, creating an atmosphere of hope and the possibility of recovery for even the most serious mental disorders. Social workers play an important part in researching and delivering these **new evidence-based practice models**. **Evidence-based practice is a process used to choose and evaluate the most effective treatment available.**

According to the US Surgeon General (1999), **mental health** is the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and providing the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity. The term **mental illness** refers collectively to health conditions characterized by alterations in emotions, thinking, or behavior. These changes result in distress or problems functioning socially, with family, and/or at work (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2017). Some of the most prevalent disorders are described in Box 10.1.

Characterizing mental health and mental illness is not as simple as these definitions might lead one to believe. For one thing, definitions of mental health and mental illness vary depending on cultural norms and social conditions. What is considered mental illness in one culture may be considered acceptable healthy behavior in another. Similarly, what was considered mental illness at one time may not be thought of the same way at a later time.

LO 1 Mental health and mental illness can be viewed as being on a continuum. Few people are completely mentally healthy all the time. All have times of impaired functioning when they are less able to have fulfilling relationships, adapt to change, or cope with adversity. For example, following the death of a loved one, it is not unusual for a person to become depressed and to have a hard time meeting day-to-day demands. He or she may develop relationship problems or have difficulty at work or both. One of the **challenges** in the mental health field is to distinguish between problems in daily living and mental illness.