

Common mental-health questions answered

Mental disorders refer to several conditions that affect the brain. These disorders include common conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, behavioural problems in children, sleeping disorders and dementia.

What are the causes of mental disorders?

There are many causes. For some persons it runs in the family and, therefore, is inherited. For other persons, it arises out of the blue with no clear cause. In other instances, it may be precipitated by stress such as death in the family, family problems, or other difficulties.

Some medical conditions may also cause mental disorders. Common prescription drugs such as steroids may induce a mental disorder, such as depression or psychosis.

How do these conditions affect the brain?

Whatever is the cause of a mental disorder, the underlying problem is a chemical imbalance in the brain. The brain is like a soup of chemicals and these chemicals may either increase or decrease, depending on the disorder. In depression, chemicals such as serotonin are increased. In conditions such as schizophrenia, the brain chemical dopamine is increased. Drugs such as cannabis increases the levels of dopamine in the brain.

What are the features associated with some of these disorders?

1. Schizophrenia: In this condition, the individual may experience hallucinations in which he or she hears voices or sees things. The individual may also have delusions which are fixed, false beliefs in which he or she thinks persons are trying to harm him or her.
2. Depression: This is a disorder in which individuals become sad and depressed. It may affect sleep. Persons with depression often lack energy and they do not get any pleasure out of life. Depression occurs twice as often in women as in men.
3. Anxiety disorders: Anxiety disorders are characterised by frequent anxiety or panic attacks. During these panic attacks, an individual may experience his heart racing fast, shortness of breath and the feeling that he is going to die. Persons with panic attacks often think they are having a heart attack.
4. Dementia: This is often associated with old age. The most common sign associated with this condition is memory loss. As the disorder progresses, there may be a deterioration in the physical health of the person.

Can mental illness be treated?

Yes. Most disorders can be treated. Conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders respond very well to medication and therapy. Disorders such as schizophrenia can also be treated. Schizophrenia is a long-term disorder and it cannot be cured, but it certainly can be treated.

What treatments are available? There are two major approaches we use to treat mental disorders: medication and therapy. Many disorders will require medication. Fortunately for us in Jamaica, most of these medications are covered by the National Health Fund. This means persons in Jamaica can access good medication at an affordable cost. Therapy is always advised and this plays a role in the treatment of all disorders.

Some persons who do not comply with medication and who cannot live at home may have to remain in a long-stay facility, such as a group home. We have several group homes for mentally ill persons operating in Jamaica.

What to do if someone refuses treatment?

If someone refuses treatment and is of perceived risk to self or others, or if that individual's condition is rapidly deteriorating, the law makes allowance for treatment without consent.

What Services are available for difficult patients?

A number of persons diagnosed with schizophrenia will not visit the doctor or take their medication. In these instances, you may engage the community mental-health team in your area. The team will visit the home and administer the monthly injection. This is not an ideal situation but we have to resort to this in order to treat some individuals.