



May is Mental Health Awareness Month
By Marggi Thordson, PHN

May is designated as the month to call attention to the millions of Americans who live with mental illnesses. Mental health disorders are very common. Statistics from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) illustrate its prevalence. If you hear someone say “I’m a 1 in 5”, they are referring to the 1 in 5 U.S. adults who experience mental illness in a given year. Preliminary statistics from [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) show the percentage of adults who report anxiety or depression increased significantly from August 2020-February 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, with the largest increase reported in ages 18-29. Almost half, or 46.4%, of U.S. adults will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. Mental health conditions are the leading cause of disability in the United States.

NAMI’s theme this year “You are Not Alone” speaks to numerous individuals who may be suffering in silence. Their goal is to connect people to resources. There is little doubt the pandemic increased stress levels with limited social interaction, changes in routines and uncertainty. Most people keep their mental health condition or symptoms hidden. They may feel ashamed or fear judgement. They do not want to be thought of as different or weird nor want to believe something is “wrong” with them. They worry they may be shunned or discriminated against at school or work. While making progress, there continues to be stigma attached to mental health conditions. One billboard reads “imagine if you got blamed for having cancer?” Stigma is when one is viewed negatively or treated differently because of their illness. NAMI and other mental health organizations strive to eradicate the stigma attached to mental illness. Stigma prevents people from seeking care and receiving treatment to get the support they need to lead productive lives.

What can you do to support someone who may be struggling with their mental health? Statistics show that less than half of individuals who need services get the help they need. The average delay in seeking treatment is 8-10 years. Be there for them even when it’s difficult. Let them know you are willing to listen. Try not to “fix it” or give out cliché advice. We do not know the depth of pain or feel the intensity of their anxiety. Do not minimize it or accuse them of faking it. Gain knowledge of mental disorders through reading material from reputable websites, like NAMI or SAMHSA (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration) or [psychiatry.org](https://www.psychiatry.org).

If you are experiencing significant symptoms that interfere with your daily living or work, the first step is to acknowledge you may need help. Mental illness is treatable and mental wellness or “brain health” can be restored. Avoid self-medicating with alcohol or drugs as your symptoms could get worse. If you have a primary care provider you may start there. Or call local professional therapy services in your area. Many offer on-line services and telehealth so it may not require you to leave your home. If you have access to a computer, the nami.org website will connect you to resources or to free online support groups. Most importantly remember “You are Not Alone” and you do not have to suffer in silence.

Statistics were sourced from Nami.org site that pools information from studies by organizations including SAMHSA, CDC & US Department of Justice. Nami help line 800-950-NAMI (6264) M-F 9am-7pm. In a crisis you can text NAMI to 741741 or call 800-273-TALK (8256) 24/7 crisis line.