



## Emotional and Psychiatric Disability

“Significant emotional or psychiatric illness includes many conditions of the brain that can impact a person’s thinking, feeling, moods, behaviors, and ability to interact with other people. For individuals with psychiatric impairment or significant mental illness, the ability to cope with everyday life can be a significant challenge. It is not uncommon for the family and caregivers to be under great stress as they care for a loved one with a psychiatric illness. Further, stigmas about this type of special need can lead to feelings of alienation, embarrassment, and isolation.

The stigma that some people have attached to emotional and mental health issues needs to be removed while at the same time recognizing the vulnerability, we all have to these issues.

Some types of psychiatric or mental impairments are described below.

*Depression* is more than feeling sad, and it is not caused by a person’s lack of desire to be happy. This condition results from many variables, including genetics, brain chemistry, traumatic events, medication side-effects, or the presence of other medical diagnoses. Major depressive illnesses can affect much more than just mood, as behaviors, thought patterns, and physical wellness are often also impacted.

*Bipolar disorder* (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is an illness characterized by acute changes in mood. Individuals often suffer significant variations in mood, referred to as manic and depressive episodes at their most extreme. This disorder is treatable.

*Schizophrenia* is a serious mental illness in which a person cannot think or behave normally and often experiences delusions. Essentially, it is a breakdown in the relationship of thought, emotion, and behavior. This leads to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation.

*Anxiety Disorders:*

- *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*, in which obsessive fears or anxiety may lead to compulsions to perform rituals perceived to control the anxieties.
- *Panic disorders* can include sudden attacks of fear with physiological symptoms such as sweating, increased heart rate, faintness, and more. Sensations can be similar to heart attack symptoms.

- *Social anxiety disorder* can lead to excessive or unreasonable fears in everyday social situations, often interfering with ordinary activities.
- *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*, can occur following the experience of an extreme emotional trauma involving the threat of injury or death.

*Phobias* are overwhelming, seemingly irrational fears that can cause a panic or anxiety attack.

*Addiction* is the continued repetition of a behavior despite adverse consequences. It is the state of being enslaved to a habit or practice or to something that is psychologically or physically habit-forming. Like other chronic illnesses, addiction often includes repeated cycles of relapse and remission. At times a person desperate to manage mental illness may turn to behaviors to mediate their illness, which may become sources of addiction.

This is a only partial list of the types of mental or psychiatric illnesses and disorders. Although multiple factors impact how these impairments manifest, they can each affect an individual's mood, thinking, or behavior in such a manner as to encroach on their ability to participate fully as part of the church community.

The degree of impact of a mental illness can vary from day to day, thus the person's needs for support or assistance can change over time, even daily. Because of the stigma associated with mental and psychiatric illness, many sufferers will not openly admit their needs, which inhibits access to medical and psychological therapies and resources that are available.

It is important to remember a few important issues relative to mental or psychiatric impairments:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one in four families has at least one family member with a mental illness.
- Mental and psychiatric illness impacts people of all ages, cultures, ethnicities, and genders.
- Current research indicates that a biological or biochemical factor is likely present in many cases of mental illness. Thus, perceptions that this type of impairment is self-selected are typically not accurate. Furthermore, traumatic or extremely stressful life events can intensify an existing mood disorder.
- Individuals with mental illness are more likely to contact a member of their church clergy than they are to seek out medical care and attention.”

[Source: *Keys to Special Needs Ministries: Emotional and Psychiatric Disability*, General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department, Author: Fran Chaffee Grossenbacher, Editor: Gary B. Swanson]