



AMERICAN MENTALTM WELLNESS ASSOCIATION

Medical Alert! *This is not an advertisement. Please read and implement.*

Mental health problems are physical medical conditions that have cognitive and emotional symptoms. Mental Health problems precede drug and alcohol addictions by about 3 years in most cases. Early intervention of these physical medical conditions has been proven to work but people are not educated on the early signs and symptoms. Unfortunately, research shows nearly everyone will have a mental health problem sometime in their life but very few will obtain prompt and appropriate care to limit the negative consequences.

Doctors now routinely screen patients for conditions like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and several types of cancer and they encourage patients to monitor themselves for symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pains, unexpected weight loss, unusual lumps, changes in skin texture or the shape or appearance of a mole that could be early warning signs of serious health problems. This approach to medicine has led to many positive results. Earlier detection and treatment of heart disease, diabetes, and many types of cancer have lowered death tolls from each of these conditions and improved overall health outcomes. Death rates from suicide and drug overdoses however have been rising. It's time we start paying attention to some of the early warning signs of a developing mental health problem (can include addiction)!

Finally, here is a self-assessment tool anyone can use to know when early medical care is needed. Below is a list of 9 simple questions you can ask yourself or a loved one that may help you recognize a developing mental health or addiction problem before it reaches a crisis stage. As with any such screening, there will be some false positives. Not every chest pain is a heart attack and not every unusual emotional state or thought pattern indicates a mental illness. That does not mean however that you should simply ignore persistent chest pains or persistent changes in your mental or emotional state. **Follow up with your family physician for further evaluation if indicated. ***

Mental Wellness Self-Assessment Tool – mark “X”	Always or nearly always	Often	Sometimes	Never or nearly never
(1) I feel emotionally numb.				
(2) I wish I could just cease to exist.				
(3) I think others would be better off without me.				
(4) I lose my temper and/or overact to small things and then feel badly about how I have treated people				
(5) I feel I need a drink or some other drug to make it through the day or to get to sleep at night.				
(6) I experience thoughts or voices that I cannot get out of my head.				
(7) I think people are out to get me.				
(8) I have feelings of impending doom.				
(9) I feel pretty good about my life and the future.				

Here's what your answers mean:

Clearly, just having these thoughts from time to time does not mean there is something wrong with you. Everyone has them sometimes. However, ***each of the first 8 mental and emotional states are comparatively rare in healthy individuals. Experiencing any of these mental states often, or even sometimes, may indicate you are moving towards developing a mental health or addiction problem.** In contrast, feeling “pretty good” about one’s life is more or less the default setting for the human brain; and, the absence of this mildly positive emotional state implies you are experiencing more stress than you are able to tolerate. See further explanations below.

Question 1: I feel emotionally numb.

Clinical depression is not the same thing as sadness. Depression is the absence of an ability to experience positive emotions like love, joy, or contentment. The earliest and most persistent symptom of clinical depression is often a kind of painful emotional numbness. The small moments of pleasure in day to day life: eating a favorite meal, finding a good parking spot, or getting a hug from your kid, fail to trigger the usual positive response. Emotional numbness is rare in people who are not experiencing depression, but very common in those with depression. Even individuals experiencing profound grief can usually muster some happiness over the outpourings of support from friends and family if they are not also experiencing depression.

Question 2: I wish I could just cease to exist.

Even when a person is experiencing great emotional distress, thoughts about active suicide are rare. Rather, the person just wants the pain to stop. A feeling that one would like to just cease to exist suggests that the present condition is not likely to just run its course on its own. Your unconscious brain does not believe your body will be able to simply correct the problem without outside help. Perhaps you have suffered mild seasonal depression in the past, but this is going to be worse.

Question 3: I think others would be better off without me.

First, if you are thinking this way, you are almost definitely wrong. The loss of a loved one, particularly if people feel that it is their fault for failing to show their loved one just how much they were wanted and needed, causes tremendous emotional pain. Believing others would be better off without you suggests a plunge towards serious depression.

Questions 1-3: If you have been experiencing all three of these mental states frequently, you may be heading towards a major depression episode. Individually they are red flags for depression. When they occur together, they should raise serious concerns.

Question 4: I lose my temper and/or overreact to small things and feel badly later about how I have treated people.

Mild traumatic brain injury and/or exposure to high levels of stress hormones can impair the functioning of the part of the brain that calibrates emotions. This causes emotions to easily swing to extremes. Mild annoyances can elicit rage. Minor disappointments can plunge the person into despair. Usually the person knows they are overreacting but cannot seem to stop themselves. This kind of emotional instability is the signature symptom of PTSD. Only a small percentage of patients with PTSD have flashbacks, but nearly all individuals with PTSD report emotional instability and difficulty with personal relationships. If you find this happening to you, you may want to find ways to reduce your levels of stress hormones and/or monitor and consciously regulate your emotional responses. Remember that whether a person experiences PTSD or not is not a matter of how much stress they have objectively experienced, but rather how much cortisol and other stress hormones their bodies have produced in response to that stress. Just like an allergic reaction, some people will overproduce stress hormones in response to specific stresses which would not affect other people so drastically.

Question 5: I feel I need a drink or some other drug to make it through the day or to get to sleep at night.

Addiction is not a matter of how much alcohol or other drugs you use, or even how frequently. Addiction is the process of your body adapting to the presence of the drug in a way that makes it progressively less effective over time and makes it difficult for your systems to function properly without it. The feeling that using the drug is a matter of need is often the first warning signal that drug use is becoming drug dependence.

Question 6: I experience thoughts or voices that I cannot get out of my head.

If a person is having an hallucination, it usually does not seem like a hallucination to them. It seems real. Likewise flashbacks often seem like memories and obsessions seem like highly focused concern. In each of these circumstances however, the thoughts or voices are not wanted, and they continue even if the person is trying to shut them out. Frequently experiencing thoughts or voices in your head that you cannot shut out suggests you are losing control over the direction of your mind.

Question 7: I think people are out to get me.

Unless you are in a witness protection program, at most, there may be a few specific people who wish you ill. If you start thinking that people in general have hostile intentions towards you, it could be paranoia. Even when people are getting death threats from anonymous Twitter trolls, they do not think about those threats all the time and they do not generalize their fears to include everyone around them.

Question 8: I have a feeling of impending doom.

Prior to suffering a major heart attack, many patients report that they had been experiencing a feeling of impending doom for several days or weeks before the episode. Similar experiences have been reported by pregnant women shortly before a miscarriage and by people with a range of mental health diagnoses prior to a first psychotic episode. When the parts of your brain which unconsciously monitor the functioning of various organs detect a serious problem, they try to warn the conscious mind in the only way available to them, through the emotions. A feeling of impending doom is the most serious warning message your unconscious brain can send you. In essence, your brain thinks that whatever problem is developing could actually kill you. Maybe your immune system is losing a battle with an infection, or your heart muscle is not getting enough oxygen, or one or more neurotransmitter levels in your brain are dropping to levels where key circuits will no longer be able to function. In any case, this is a sign for you to see your physician for a checkup.

Question 9: I feel pretty good about my life and the future.

The default emotional setting for the human mind is mildly optimistic. Not, “everything is great and wonderful”, but things are “OK”, “pretty good”, “fine”. Maybe I am going through a rough patch now, but I have a roof over my head and enough to eat, or if not that, then I have my health or good friends and people who care about me, or prospects about my situation improving. People vary greatly in their life circumstances and their general level of optimism or pessimism, but no matter what they are going through now, or have experienced in the past, their brains still keep trying to pull them back to a baseline mental state that has strong survival value. Feeling “pretty good” about life allows people to continue to strive for improvements without getting too discouraged about setbacks. If a person is not fairly regularly experiencing this mildly positive worldview, then it is a strong indication the amount of stress they are experiencing (financial, physical, and/or emotional) has exceeded their ability to tolerate it. Such a person should seek help either to reduce some of the sources of stress in their lives, or to develop better stress management skills because their unconscious mind is giving up on them.

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