

Sharing Hope:

An African American Guide
to Mental Health





NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization. NAMI provides advocacy, education, support and public awareness so that all individuals and families affected by mental health conditions can build better lives.

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Wellness means being healthy physically, mentally and spiritually. Mental health conditions in particular can affect all of us. One in every four individuals has a mental health condition of some kind, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. African Americans are no exception.

Any part of the body—including the brain—can get sick. We all experience emotional ups and downs caused by specific events in our lives, such as a death in the family or a new job. Mental health conditions don't follow the rules of these typical reactions, however. They are medical conditions that cause changes in a person's thoughts, feelings and mood. These changes can make it hard to relate to others and carry out daily functions.

The good news is that there is help, and that these conditions can be treated. If you or someone you love has a mental health condition, it is important to know that recovery is possible.

This guide will help you learn how to recognize mental health conditions, the types of treatments and supports available and where to go for help. The stories in this guide illustrate what it is like to live with a mental health condition. They are meant to illustrate common issues only. For these examples, we will assume that an evaluation has been completed, since the only way to get an accurate diagnosis is to get a full evaluation from a mental health professional (see page 12 for more on getting an evaluation).

Mental health conditions:

- can make it hard to live day-to-day life.
- take a toll on personal and professional relationships.
- can occur at any age (50% begin by age 14).
- are treatable.
- are not divine punishment.
- are not anybody's fault.
- are not the result of bad parenting.
- are not caused by weakness or lack of willpower.



“Last week, for the first time in a long time, I was able to sit and have a decent conversation with Tony, my husband. It makes me nervous not knowing what to expect from him.

Tony was sharp, hardworking and very popular. He had one of those personalities that you could not help but notice when he entered a room. Then, a few years ago, he started to change. His days got packed to the brim: he worked two jobs, went to the gym, played ball and just didn't need to sleep. He looked and acted invincible. All of a sudden, he felt we needed lots of things we didn't need before. I remember him saying, 'I'll work three jobs and a part-time gig to have the things we need.'

Then there were times when he would get angry over nothing and everything got on his nerves. He started missing work and wanted to stay in bed all day. I thought he had been working too hard and just needed a break. I tried to help by fixing his favorite meals and taking him out to a movie or dancing. Nothing worked.

We had begun to fight more and more, but then all of a sudden, he seemed to be his old self again. A month later, he started apologizing over and over for being a disappointment and a good for nothing. He has begun drinking and God knows what else he is doing. I know that Tony loves me, but I just can't handle anymore not knowing which of his many moods I will be dealing with.”

—Aliyah

Tony Is Experiencing Symptoms of *Bipolar Disorder*

Bipolar disorder is a condition that causes an irregular pattern of changes in mood, energy and thinking. People with bipolar disorder have high and low moods, known as mania and depression, which differ from the typical ups and downs most people experience.

Symptoms of *Mania*:

- Increased energy, not wanting or not being able to sleep
- Euphoria, feeling invincible
- Splurging money or excess in other areas
- Agitation, irritability, nervousness, impatience, anger
- Thinking and/or speaking very fast
- Exaggerated self-esteem
- Poor judgment
- Disproportionate or unrealistic ideas or plans

Symptoms of *Depression*:

- Sadness and feelings of hopelessness
- Loss of self-esteem
- Excessive feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Difficulty focusing and making decisions
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Suicidal thoughts or plans

Facts You Should Know

- Some individuals with bipolar disorder do not realize that they need help.
- Bipolar disorder is highly treatable.
- African Americans with bipolar disorder tend to be underdiagnosed.
- Researchers have found high rates of attempted suicide among African Americans with bipolar disorder.
- Alcohol or other drug use is common with this condition; it often decreases when the disorder is treated.
- Treatment options include therapy, education, medication and other supports.



“I’m taking off school for a few days to go help my sister Jasmine. I’m really worried about her.

Jaz was a happy teen with good grades and good friends in school. Yes, sometimes she misbehaved, but it was nothing out of normal teen behavior. But in the past year, she has started acting increasingly weird. One day, for no apparent reason, she went into the school’s gym and completely trashed it. She is failing most of her classes. She doesn’t have any friends left.

The other day, Mom told me that Jaz has been refusing to come out of her room for days at a time. When I called to ask her what was going on, she said she was ‘hiding from the people who are trying to get her.’ I could not convince her that nobody is trying to get her. She sounded so afraid. I tried to tell her a joke to get her to relax. But instead of laughing, she cried. We know she is alone in her room, but Mom hears her talking to someone else. Other times she paces the floor all night, peeping through the blinds, as if looking for someone.

I am beginning to think that my sister is losing her mind. I hope things will be okay when I get there and that Jaz will be all right.”

—Jason

Jasmine Is Experiencing Symptoms of *Schizophrenia*

Schizophrenia is a condition that interferes with the ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to other people.

The first signs of schizophrenia may only be a change of friends, a drop in grades or an increase in irritability.

Other symptoms include:

- Inability to keep a job or to maintain healthy relationships
- Fears of being persecuted (mistreated, victimized, wronged)
- Inappropriate emotional reactions (such as weeping when someone tells a joke)
- Hearing, seeing or smelling things that do not exist (hallucinations)
- Difficulty thinking clearly or making rational decisions
- Difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy, usually called psychosis. Psychotic hallucinations and delusions people experience can cause them to behave in unusual or unpredictable ways
- Disorganized thoughts and language, such as leaping from topic to topic without any connection, making up words or uttering noises instead of words

Facts You Should Know

- While the occurrence of schizophrenia is the same across all racial communities, research has shown that African Americans tend to be overdiagnosed with schizophrenia due to provider bias and lack of cultural competence.
- The first signs of schizophrenia usually emerge in the teenage years or early 20s.
- People with this condition are not usually violent, but co-occurring substance abuse can increase this risk.
- Schizophrenia can be treated with therapy, education, medication and other supports.



“I still can’t believe Dad is gone. Worse, I can’t believe he took his own life. That’s just not something he would do. I know he had not been himself since he was diagnosed with diabetes. The doctors did say that he would go through bouts of the blues from time to time, but we never expected this.

Things started to change little by little. He started complaining of feeling weak and about his head hurting all the time. I thought he felt weak because he wasn’t eating much. He used to be so outgoing and all—one of those strong, committed deacons of the church. He stopped helping at church because he said he was more of a burden than helpful. He loved to get together with friends for weekly board games. I don’t even remember when he stopped doing that. Actually, now that I think about it, gradually, he stopped doing most of the things he used to enjoy doing. I thought he was just getting old and starting to slow down. Now I am thinking it was more than that.

Weeks before he passed, he gave away his home improvement tools. He really loved those tools, but I just thought he had no further use for them. A couple of days ago, he began cleaning out his closet. I thought this was a good sign and that he was starting to break through the slump, an ‘out with the old, in with the new’ situation. All of a sudden he seemed busy and in a better mood. Next week was his birthday. I miss him already.”

—Tammie

Tammie's Father Experienced Symptoms of *Depression*

Depression is more than just feeling sad or blue once in a while—it's a condition that affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. It takes away a person's energy, interests and pleasure interfering with all aspects of life. The symptoms of depression are:

- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of concentration
- Loss of energy
- Lack of interest
- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Changes in movement
- Physical aches and pains
- Wishing to die and thoughts of taking one's life

These symptoms have to last for at least two weeks to be considered depression.

Facts You Should Know

- Depression is the leading cause of disability in America.
- Depression can occur at any age, including childhood, teenage years and adulthood.
- Untreated depression is a risk factor for suicide.
- African Americans are less likely to receive appropriate diagnoses and treatment for depression and are more likely to have depression for long periods of time.
- Depression can be treated with therapy, education, medication and other types of support.

“Recovery is a personal journey. Once you get your diagnosis, explore what works to help you recover. You just have to find what works for you and work on it.”

—Mary

Recovery is Possible!

While the conditions we just covered can seem scary and overwhelming, the good news is that people who face them can and do get well. While people can recover, they need professional help to do it. They can't just snap out it, and praying is not enough.

Steps to Finding Help

If you are dealing with a mental health condition, you should:

1. Speak honestly about these matters with people you trust.
2. Seek help from a health care professional.
3. Contact NAMI.
4. Become your greatest advocate.

1. Speak honestly about these matters with people you trust.

If you think you or someone you love may have one of these conditions, talk with a person you trust about the changes you have noticed that concern you; perhaps he has noticed them as well. Introduce the subject matter with great respect and love, since the person who has the problem might not be aware of these changes or could feel scared or ashamed about them. If you think you have a mental health condition, tell someone you trust and ask for support in seeking help.

Mental Health Professionals

Clinical social workers are trained to help with individual and family problems, including mental health conditions.

Psychologists are trained in mental health issues. They provide counseling (therapy).

Psychiatrists are medical doctors, so they can prescribe medications. They specialize in mental health conditions.

2. Seek professional help.

It is very important to seek professional help as soon as possible. Your primary care doctor is a great place to start. Your doctor may be able to start the assessment process or assist you in getting a referral to a mental health professional.



Unfortunately, while many African Americans would prefer finding an African American mental health professional, this is not often possible. Thankfully, professionals are increasingly required to learn how to effectively treat people from diverse backgrounds.

Your mental health provider will play an important role in your treatment, so make sure you can work with this person, that you communicate well together and that she respects and integrates your culture, beliefs and values into your treatment plan.

- Ask questions to make sure the provider is a good fit for you.
- Speak clearly and honestly with your provider. A good provider should take the time to explain things in terms that you can understand. Remember, they are there to help you. Ask as many questions as you need in order to understand the situation and accept the suggested treatment.
- Mention your beliefs, values and cultural characteristics. Make sure that he understands them so that they can be considered in the course of your treatment. For example, mention whether it is important for you that your family be part of your treatment.

If finances are preventing you from finding help, get in contact with a local health or mental health clinic or your local government to see what services you qualify for. You can find contact information online at [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov), or by calling the National Treatment Referral Helpline at 800-662-HELP (4357).

Questions you can ask to get a sense of your provider's level of cultural sensitivity:

- Have you ever treated African Americans with my diagnosis?
- Have you received training in cultural competence or multicultural mental health?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our relationship and my treatment?
- How do you plan to integrate my beliefs and practices in my treatment?

During Your First Doctor's Appointments:

- Make a list of the changes and behaviors you have observed that worry you.
- Be honest and explain to the doctor everything you have noticed so he can make the right diagnosis. To make a diagnosis, the doctor looks at a group of symptoms. Your doctor will want to know the following:
 - Frequency: how often the feeling or behavior occurs.
 - Intensity: how much it interferes with a person's daily life.
 - Duration: how long it lasts.
- Be aware that African Americans are more likely to mention physical symptoms related to mental health problems, and that culturally insensitive providers might not recognize the connection of these symptoms to a mental health problem.
- Be patient. It could take time and multiple visits before you get the right diagnosis.

3. Contact NAMI.

You and your family are not alone. NAMI, an organization of individuals and family members who live with mental health conditions, offers free support, information, education, hope and assistance. NAMI members get what you are going through since they have gone through similar experiences.

To find a NAMI near you, visit www.nami.org or call 800-950-NAMI (6264).

“NAMI gave me the love and support I needed, right when I needed it. I no longer feel alone. In NAMI, I have a family that supports me and helps me deal with my illness.”

—Debbie

4. Become your greatest advocate.

African Americans generally experience disparities in mental health care. Some of these disparities are due to bias and lack of cultural sensitivity from the mental health system, which manifest as misdiagnoses and inadequate treatment, among others. Furthermore, the mental health system can be challenging to navigate. For these reasons, learning as much as possible about the illness, treatments, your rights, resources, etc. will help you navigate the system so that you can get appropriate care. Your local NAMI can show you how to find the information you need. The more you know, the more you can make educated decisions about your care.

Treatments and Supports

Thankfully, there are different treatment options available. Often, a combination of them works best. Research shows that people get better when they embrace a treatment plan of their choosing that includes a variety of treatments and supports. You can choose what works best for you in partnership with your health care provider.

Family and Peer Support

“Intimate relationships with family members and friends are so wonderful to experience. Feeling connected is the most wonderful feeling of all.”

—Clarence

Whether it’s from the family you were born into or the family you have chosen, support from loved ones can play a big role in your treatment plan. They can keep you accountable, help you recognize the early signs of a possible relapse, help you with other treatment components (for example, exercise with you or take you to appointments), and provide moral support, among other things.

Peer-support groups have proven to be very helpful as well. They consist of supports provided by people who have lived experience dealing with mental health conditions. Organizations such as NAMI offer free education classes and support groups for people living with mental health conditions and family members. To find a NAMI in your community, visit www.nami.org or call 800-950-NAMI (6264).

Spirituality and Faith

Faith and spirituality can greatly help in the recovery process. If spirituality is an important part of your life, your spiritual practices can be a strong part of your treatment plan. Talk to your doctors about how important your faith is to you, and spend time in prayer and worship focused on healing (finding a good doctor, receiving the right treatment, dealing with the symptoms, etc.). Your spiritual leaders and faith community can provide great help and support during the difficult times caused by mental health conditions. At the same time, unfortunately, sometimes faith communities can be a source of additional distress if they are not well informed and do not know how to support families dealing with these conditions.



Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy consists of talking to a trained professional about the situations you are going through. The professional will listen without judgment and support you through your life's challenges by helping you see them in a different light, offering insight and helping you explore them. Don't worry about your privacy; everything you share with your therapist is confidential.

Medications

Let's face it: We don't always like to take medications for fear of becoming addicted to them or not being exactly sure of what you are taking. However, medications need to be considered since they have proven to work well for mental health conditions. You and your doctor can seek the medication(s) most effective for you. Talk with your doctor about different options and their side effects. Some things to remember:



- It usually takes time and various tries before finding the right medication(s).
- Be patient, and don't give up if the medications don't seem to work at first. It takes time for them to start working in your system, and experiencing a period of medication adjustment is common.
- You may experience side effects from the medication; monitor them and report them to your mental health provider.
- Don't discontinue the medications once you start feeling better. Feeling better means that the medications—and the other treatments you are using—are working.

Other Healing Practices

The arts (dance, music, visual arts, etc.), journaling, meditation, yoga and other relaxation techniques are helpful recovery practices. In addition, it is important to live a healthy and active lifestyle that includes eating well and exercising.

NAMI *Resources*

Sharing Hope

Sharing Hope is an hour-long program that increases mental health awareness in African American communities by sharing the presenters' journeys toward recovery and exploring the signs and symptoms of some illnesses. www.nami.org/sharinghope.



www.nami.org

On NAMI's website, you can find the latest information on mental health, as well as treatment and support resources. You can also read inspirational stories of recovery from real people—and even share your own.

NAMI HelpLine

Our free phone line is open Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. EST. The HelpLine can assist you in connecting with your local NAMI, community services and supports, and also send you information on specific topics. 800-950-NAMI (6264)

Education and Support Programs

NAMI offers a variety of free programs for people with mental health conditions and their family members. These programs are taught by trained volunteers who have had similar experiences. For more information, visit www.nami.org/programs.

Other *Resources*

American Psychiatric Association www.healthy minds.org

Black Psychiatrists of America www.bpainc.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration www.samhsa.gov/index.aspx

National Association of Black Social Workers www.nabsw.org/mserver

National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/index.shtml

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The Association of Black Psychologists www.abpsi.org



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