

Observations from volunteer work with families of persons with mental illness, current news, and trainings reveal it is apparent that many do not know the signs and symptoms pointing to the possibility that a loved one or friend may be developing or have mental illness. Many persons are affected an average of 11 years before formal diagnosis or treatment. Mental illness affects people among us, and we can learn to recognize the signs and symptoms then be prepared to seek diagnosis and treatment options.

From the National Alliance on Mental Illness: [NAMI MI Statistics](#) referenced from SAMHSA's Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States:

"Results from the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year

1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year

1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year

50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-34"

For perspective, think of the numbers as people; 1 in 6 youth in an average classroom of 20-24 students would indicate at least 3 or 4 students in every classroom are experiencing a mental health disorder. For one of them, the illness is very serious.

From NAMI's website <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-andhttps://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-and-SymptomsSymptoms>

"Trying to tell the difference between what expected behaviors are and what might be the signs of a mental illness isn't always easy. There's no easy test that can let someone know if there is mental illness or if actions and thoughts might be typical behaviors of a person or the result of a physical illness.

Each illness has its own symptoms, but common signs of mental illness in adults and adolescents can include the following: *(Italic examples added for clarity)*

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite
- Changes in sex drive

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- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality)
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior, or personality (“lack of insight” or anosognosia)
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing “aches and pains”)
- Thinking about suicide
- Inability to carry out daily activities (*like ignoring personal hygiene*) or handle daily problems and stress (*like work and school demands*)
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Indulging in risky behaviors, (*speeding, dare devil feats, fighting*)
- Self-harming, (*by cutting, burning, choking, starving, or overeating*)

Mental health conditions can also begin to develop in young children. Because they're still learning how to identify and talk about thoughts and emotions, their most obvious symptoms are behavioral. Symptoms in children may include the following:

- Changes in school performance
- Excessive worry or anxiety, for instance fighting to avoid bed or school
- Hyperactive behavior
- Frequent nightmares
- Frequent disobedience or aggression
- Frequent temper tantrums”

The signs are often ‘normalized,’ meaning people suggest that the undesired behavior viewed as abnormal, is considered normal for some. Often people engage in denial and avoid diagnosis and treatment options because of stigma.

So, what if you notice several of these symptoms in yourself or a person you love or see regularly?

An important action is to “Say it Out Loud,” with caring and caution. If you are experiencing symptoms, then tell someone with the ability to help, how you are feeling and ask for help to arrange for the assessment and care you need. If you are concerned for another, confronting someone about a mental health condition can be hurtful, and the conversation can escalate to danger. Think for a while how you might feel in the opposite seat of this situation. Foremost, it is scary to even consider your brain is ill, you may be losing control of your life, and that someone wants you hospitalized, willingly or not. This conversation is best done with the person and at least two caring people in a safe environment. Approach the subject when the person is calm. Assume the most loving, caring position and simply relate that you are concerned about the person's wellbeing. Ask about their feelings, ask what they think is going on. Listen! It is alright to

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ask about any suicidal thinking or plans. If needed, relate a few important elements that have raised your concern. Don't share your whole list, that can be overwhelming.

Avoid reacting with horror, anger, or coercion. Assure the person that you love and want to help them find the medical attention they need to feel better. Work together on a plan of action. Safety is always a top priority. Consider the availability of weapons. Certainly, if the person is considering suicide and has a plan, or self-harming, or is threatening or planning to harm others, an immediate visit to a behavioral health urgent care facility is warranted. If there is a current crisis, a dangerous situation, in Davie County we call 911, and you may ask for a Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) Responder. *(NOTE: July 2022 the number to call will be 988, for suicide prevention or mental health crisis.)*

If you decide the issue is not immediately life threatening, then schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist's office or to a primary care physician if no psychiatrist is available within 2 weeks. You can access mental health services through the provider network via their health insurance policy, look for a number to call or website to access on the back of your card. If insured by Medicaid or uninsured, in Davie, you now have two options: Partners Behavioral Health Management, 1-877-864-1454, or Kintegra Health, 704-874-3316. Please do not hesitate to explain if you feel your situation is urgent.

The 2020 statistics also show that only 46.2% of adults with mental illness receive treatment, 64.5% with serious mental illnesses receive treatment. In 2016, 50.6% of youth aged 6-17 with a mental health disorder received treatment. 11% have no insurance coverage and 150 million people live in a designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Area. [NAMI MI Statistics](#) The vast majority of persons diagnosed with mental illness are not violent, but there is a small subset of concern. Those yet to be diagnosed and/or untreated may become violent due to a lack of self-control or psychosis. Moreover, if the person is a young male indulging in alcohol, marijuana or other drug use, the risk of violence is higher. [Scopeblog Stanford Edu 4/27/22](#) It is important to assist persons toward treatment, even when there are challenges to overcome to do so. (Learn more at [NC Statute on MH Hospitalization & Treatment](#))

Family and friends can be the supportive lifeline someone needs to maintain safety and allow rest during recovery. Do your best to ensure your own safety, while encouraging your family member to engage in assessment and treatment. People can't focus on recovery when they are too young, or experiencing severe illness, and too stressed even to manage daily life. Help them with basic needs, to seek medical treatment, and follow treatment guidelines. Abandoning a person, especially a young adult with signs of mental illness, can be so stressful it results in self-harm or harm to others. Your local NAMI, NW Piedmont, NC offers weekly support groups and at least an annual class for diagnosed persons or families/friends to learn more about coping with and supporting a family member or friend with a mental illness. Learn more at [naminwpiedmontnc.org](#) OR [naminc.org](#) for other online opportunities.

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