

933,000 Adults in NJ Have a Mental Illness But Few Get Help

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While grabbing a cup of coffee during New Jersey rush hour, spending 40 hours a week at the office, or enjoying your daughter's soccer game, you've likely interacted with someone who's dealing with a mental illness.

That's not as alarming as you might think.

While still stigmatized to some degree, individuals with mental health issues have become more willing to admit their disorders and seek help. Treatment services, meanwhile, have evolved to allow those with even the more severe mental illnesses to return to a normal and productive life.

Starting today, New Jersey 101.5 presents a five-day series on mental health in New Jersey and the impact of disorders that affect mood, thinking and behavior.

An annual average of 933,674 New Jersey adults had a mental illness — mild or extreme — from 2011 through 2015, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Of that crowd, nearly 250,000 were diagnosed with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

From 2014 through 2015, an annual average of 259,000 adults had serious thoughts of suicide during the previous year.

"On a national scene, New Jersey pretty closely mirrors the stats for mental illness," said Phil Lubitz, associate director of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) New Jersey. "Basically, 1 in 5 individuals is affected by a mental illness — that holds true for adults and more or less holds true for children."

Mental illnesses are known to have serious co-morbidities such as diabetes and coronary heart disease, noted Debra Wentz, president and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies. Additionally, about 18 percent of individuals with mental illness have a co-occurring substance use disorder.

Debra Wentz, president/CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (Dino Flammia, Townsquare Media NJ)

Depending on the intensity and duration, Wentz said, mental illness can interfere with all aspects of an individual's life — relationships, work, eating and sleeping, for example.

The exact cause of one's disorder is not always known. A number of factors could be at play from a young age or later on in life.

"There could be, but does not necessarily have to be a genetic component," Wentz said.

"Mental illnesses often develop in response to physical illnesses or life situations at any age."

Of the 900,000-plus New Jerseyans with a mental illness, an annual average of less than a third received any services to address the issue.

In our second part of this series, we'll examine the treatment and services plus some of the obstacles standing in the way of people seeking help.