



## **Journey, Interrupted**

Mental Health Month raises awareness about conditions such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder.



By Marilyn Campbell  
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Donna couldn't smile. Overwhelmed by the activities of her daily life, she couldn't concentrate or experience happiness.

"It felt like there was a thousand pounds on my shoulder and I couldn't alleviate myself of it," she said. "I didn't want to be noticed. I didn't want anybody to talk to me. I had been a very happy, busy person, but as depression began to take over I felt like I didn't have any hopes or anything to look forward to."

As a young mother of two small children, Donna was unable to appreciate the joys of new parenthood.

"I couldn't have fun with my children," said the now 72-year-old grandmother of four. "I did the basics. I did what I had to do, but I didn't do it out of pleasure or love. I did it out of necessity."

Donna was diagnosed and hospitalized. That was nearly 40 years ago, the beginning of her journey through the darkness of depression. It is a path that has spanned most of her adult life and has included suicidal ideations.

"The thought entered my mind," she said. "I know that I would never do it, but the thought did enter my mind."

She is now on medication for depression: "With medication I became 100 percent again. I was like a new person. I was happy again."

Mental health experts say that Donna is fortunate. "There are a group of people who truly are helped by medicine and they just know they have to be on it," said Potomac-based psychologist and researcher Linda Berg-Cross, Ph.D. "Some people don't have the money or wherewithal to get and maintain treatment."

One in four Americans suffers from a diagnosable and treatable mental illness. The Centers For Disease Control reports that while 80-90 percent of disorders are treatable using medication and other therapies, fewer than half of the adults who are diagnosed get help.

Experts are using the month of May – Mental Health Month – to raise awareness about conditions such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, and also offer guidance in tearing down the barriers to treatment.

"Too many people who are living with a mental health condition never seek or receive help due to stigma, lack of information, cost or lack of health care insurance coverage," said David Shern, Ph.D., president of Mental

## Getting Help

Mental Health America offers the following suggestions:

- Get referrals from a family doctor, clergy members, mental health associations or a crisis center. Insurance companies can offer a list of participating providers.
- Eligible veterans can get care through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. For more information, go to [www.va.gov/health](http://www.va.gov/health) or call 1-877-222-8387.
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration can help identify affordable mental health services. Visit <http://mentalhealth.gov> or call 1-877-726-4727.
- The mental health divisions of most health departments or community mental health centers provide free or low-cost treatment and services on a sliding scale.
- Many companies offer employee assistance programs (EAP) and can issue a referral to a provider. Reach out to the human resources office to learn more.
- Medicare offers a list of participating doctors on its website, [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov). (Click on "Find a Doctor.")
- To find providers who accept Medicaid, use the map at [www.namd.org](http://www.namd.org).

Health America in Alexandria, Va. "We need to change that. It's important that everyone have access to treatment and services because we have a tremendous amount of knowledge about how to identify, treat and even prevent mental health conditions."

The road to recovery begins with recognizing the symptoms. The American Psychiatric Association identifies possible warning signs as personality changes, inability to cope with daily activities, excessive anxiety, prolonged sadness or extreme highs and lows. Mental illness can be caused by genetic, biological or environmental factors.

One of the biggest barriers is the shame that some people associate with mental illness. "I see this day in and day out," said Dr. Lisa Calusic, an Arlington resident and psychiatrist at Inova Mount Vernon Hospital and Inova Behavioral Health Services in Alexandria. "In our culture, having a mental illness is a sign of weakness or inferiority and the way to handle it is to suck it up and move forward. That is completely horrible and inaccurate and no one can get better with that kind of attitude."

Such barriers are best fought with knowledge. "When some people hear labels like depression or anxiety, they think someone is telling them that there is something wrong with them," said Berg-Cross. "Don't use labels, give people information. When somebody is in a total state of denial, all you can do is give them information."

Berg-Cross has tried this in her own life. "I had a brother who had terrible OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder]," she said. "He thought he was the only normal person in the world. One day I had a pamphlet on OCD that was lying around the house. He read it and said, 'You know, I have all these things.' It was really a eureka for him because no one was pushing him."

Mental health affects physical health. The American Psychiatric Association reports that mental illness is linked to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, epilepsy and cancer. "For example, if you're schizophrenic, your life is definitely shorter than if you have brain tumors or even cancer," Berg-Cross said.

"When we talk about whole health, your mind is part of that," said Alies Muskin, executive director, Anxiety Disorders Association of America. "People forget that what is happening in your brain can have an impact on the rest of your body. The brain is an organ too."

Experts say qualified mental health treatment professionals can be found through primary care doctors, clergy members, crisis centers, mental health organizations, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We want everyone to know that while mental health and substance abuse conditions are common," said Shern, "they are extremely treatable and individuals go on to recover and lead full and productive lives."