

Mental Illness More Prevalent Than Most People Realize

By Sr. Mara Lester, RSM, Psychiatrist



My name is Sister Mara Lester, RSM, and you may recognize my picture from previous articles, as I have written in the past, yet in a different role (when I was the Interim Faith Formation Director for the Winona Diocese from January through April 2017). Since May 2017 I have been actively working at Catholic Charities, serving in the capacity of my professional training, as a psychiatrist. As a Religious Sister of Mercy of Alma, Michigan, I completed a Human Biology Degree through Michigan State University, a Medical Degree through the George Washington University in Washington, DC, and an Adult Psychiatry Residency training program through Washington University/Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, MO. I am now very grateful to be a part of the Catholic Charities team, in serving this southernmost diocese of Minnesota! As an adult psychiatrist I see persons who are 18 years old and older.

Have you ever wondered what a “mental illness” actually is? Simply put, it is “a condition that affects a person’s thinking, feeling or mood.... (and) such conditions may affect someone’s ability to relate to others and function each day.” Did you know that one in five people (or roughly 43 million Americans) experience a mental health condition in their life? Also, that 75% of all chronic mental health conditions develop by the age of 24? Although most mental health conditions are not disabling, 1 in 25 American adults have serious functional impairment due to a mental illness! For example, when years of life lost to premature mortality or years lost to disability were ranked out of 291 general conditions and injuries, Depressive Disorders ranked #5 and Anxiety Disorders ranked #13! In this article I am not even addressing the significant impact of suicide or the average global costs spent on mental health (that easily outweigh common disorders or other diseases).

It is not my intent to rattle off a bunch of statistics or numbers, but more so to highlight the staggering reality that mental illness is. Have you ever actually sat down and pondered it? Have you considered how common such illnesses are and how much they impact our lives!? I also wonder why, in general, we do not think of such illnesses or disorders in the same way as we may hypertension, diabetes, or cancer in seeking professional help.

One thing that attracted me to psychiatry is the profound fact that each of us is affected by mental illness in some fashion (personally or, perhaps, through one we love—a friend or family member). Another thing that attracted me to psychiatry is the significant misery and burden that can be present in life due to mental illness, yet also the great resilience and courage it takes for one to acknowledge difficulty, whatever it may be, and move forward seeking help to live life to its fullest!

Seeking help and working through concerning areas is not contradictory to one's faith! Quite the contrary—obtaining help and maintaining treatment and/or therapy can be integrated with one's faith life and is an active process that is weaved into each person's call to universal holiness in seeking virtue! It is important that each person deeply knows that an illness or disorder is not what defines them. Each of us has an ultimate identity from, for, and to God. As our Catholic teaching states, it is a fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and especially as baptized persons—we are God's adopted sons and daughters!

I am sure that each of us may know someone, if not ourselves, that suffer from depression or anxiety, have experienced prolonged grief from the loss of a loved one, or struggle with addiction or poor self image. I ask you to bring these points I have addressed in this article to prayer and if you are concerned, perhaps, speak to another in charity, or even yourself, about the possibility of a mental illness. So much can be eased with further education as well as one's courageous commitment to look at such concerns directly, seek help with a diagnostic assessment, and, if recommended, maintain follow up with a trusted provider.

Catholic Charities (<https://www.ccwinona.org/>) offers behavioral health and counseling services across the Winona Diocese. Please see the information about our staff, locations, and contact information below:

Other Clinical Counseling Staff:

Joye Wolf - Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist - Austin, Albert Lea, Owatonna

Kristine Madsen - Clinical Social Worker - Mankato

Annette Krutsch - Licensed Psychologist (Counselor) - Winona

Sister Mara Lester, RSM— Adult Psychiatrist - Winona

John McGuire – Director of Family and Individual Counseling. Clinical Social Worker - Rochester

Diane Dunn - Clinical Social Worker - Worthington

Location and Contact Information:

Albert Lea - (507) 377-3664, St. Theodore's Parish Center, 308 East Fountain (mail), 311 E Clark St (street), Albert Lea, MN 56007

Austin - (507) 455-2008, 430 10th Street NE, Suite 3, Austin MN 55912 (Mail: PO Box 366, Austin MN 55912)

Owatonna - (507) 455-2008, 577 State Ave, Owatonna, MN 55060

Mankato – (507) 387-5586, 201 North Broad Street, Suite 100, Mankato, MN 56001

Rochester - (507) 287-2047, 903 W. Center Street, Ste 220, Rochester MN 55902

Winona - (507) 454-2270, PO Box 379, 111 Market Street, Suite 2, Winona, MN 55987

Resources:

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-mental-illness-ami-among-adults.shtml>

US Burden of Disease Collaborators. [The state of US health, 1990-2010. Burden of diseases, injuries, and risk factors.](#) JAMA. 2013 Aug 14; 310(6):591-608.

<https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions>