

## You Are Not Alone: Recognizing Mental Health Awareness Month

Posted on May 12, Posted by [Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



***Sen. Smith writes about the prevalence of mental illness in the U.S. so we can better support those who may be struggling and help them understand it's okay to not be okay.***

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MADISON - You are not alone – you may hear this often, but especially during May and Mental Health Awareness Month. Historically, there have been stigmas attached to mental illness, preventing people from talking about it or even considering what it really is. As a society we can make tremendous differences if only we accept that the brain is like any other organ in our body. We need to take care of our mental health just as much as our physical health.

Over the last year, more Americans struggled with their mental health as a result of the pandemic. People experienced greater isolation and stress, which contributed to increased anxiety and depression. During Mental Health Awareness Month and beyond, it's important that we have conversations about our mental health needs and fully understand it's okay to not be okay. Many Americans struggle with mental health, but there are people and resources available to help and provide support.

Mental health is prevalent within the United States and disproportionately impacts certain populations. NAMI reports that one in five adults each year will experience some form of mental illness each year while less than half will seek treatment.

It's worth noting that 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14 and 75% by age 24. This statistic certainly illuminates the need to treat symptoms as early as possible. Sadly, the average length of time between the onset of mental illness symptoms and treatment is 11 years. This gives some indication as to how difficult it can be to diagnose mental illness at such a young age and work with affected parties on early intervention strategies.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the 10 to 34 year age group, and the tenth leading cause overall. This is a tragedy families should never have to endure; we can reduce those numbers dramatically with greater mental health awareness and support.

Members of the LGBTQ community experience societal prejudice and discrimination, which contribute to higher rates of mental illness. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth. Even more shocking is the fact that transgender adults are twelve times more likely to attempt suicide. With those statistics on our conscience, it would be wise for politicians to stop ostracizing the LGBTQ community and develop policies inclusive of all identities.



Additional statistics show just how prevalent mental health illness is in our communities. More than 20% of citizens experiencing homelessness, 37% of incarcerated adults and 70.4% of youth in the juvenile justice system suffer from a diagnosed mental illness. Forty-one percent of Veterans Health Administration patients suffer from a mental health disorder or drug addiction.

There is often a connection between a drug abuse disorder and mental illness, with stigmas attached to both. For too long, our society has blamed the victims of drug addiction and mental illness for their disease. With this mindset, there was rarely any compassion or services for people who needed help.



Mental health diagnosis and treatment continue to be inaccessible for many Americans. Today 55% of U.S. counties still don't have a single practicing psychiatrist. Even if mental health treatment is nearby, affordability of care is a major concern. Fortunately, laws have been in place and amended over time to ensure that patients with mental illness are not discriminated against. But, there's still more we can do to improve accessibility and affordability and remove barriers for Americans seeking support.

Much has been learned about mental health illness and treatment needs, but we still have a lot to learn. We risk paying a high cost if we don't accept that mental health illness exists. Though May is Mental Health Awareness Month, the weight of a mental illness impacts those who suffer all year long. Be understanding and compassionate as you would with anyone who suffers any other illness. And for those who suffer: you are not alone.

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