

Lesson One: Overview and Background

Lesson Overview:

This session should serve as an introduction to mental health issues. Particularly, we will focus on how our society views the issues surrounding mental health and illness. We will review the history of mental illness, focusing on the historical views of its “causes,” its treatments and its victims. Also, we will examine how the popular media has shaped our current views of mental illness. We will investigate how these portrayals have created biases and stereotypes, and whether they have any basis in the facts of mental illness. Finally, we will identify our own preconceptions, including those based on cultural stereotypes, as a way of tracking them throughout the remaining sessions and addressing/combatting mental health stigma issues.

At the end of this lesson, students should...

- Have a fundamental understanding of what mental illness does and does not include.
- Understand how our media and culture mediate this understanding and society’s reaction to issues surrounding psychiatric disability.
- Gain insight into personal preconceptions and prejudices, including sources and outcomes of these conceptions.

Before you begin...

According to the Surgeon General:

Mental illness is a term...that refers collectively to all of the diagnosable mental disorders. Mental disorders are characterized by abnormalities in cognition, emotion or mood, or the highest integrative aspects of behavior, such as social interactions or planning of future activities. These mental functions are all mediated by the brain.

Mental illness includes (but is not limited to) diagnosable disorders like: depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bipolar disorder.

But is not the same as: developmental disorders (like Down’s Syndrome), learning disorders, or general behavior or discipline issues.

We don’t yet know what causes mental illness. It is probably some combination of a predisposition (either genetic or physical), combined with an environmental trigger that causes a change in the chemistry of the brain. Being an individual, those students who “stand out” because they are “different,” is sometimes confused with having a “mental problem,” especially for teenagers. It’s important to emphasize that choosing to dress differently, act differently, interact differently doesn’t mean that someone has a mental illness.

One in four adults has a mental illness. One in five children between the ages of 9 and 17 has a mental illness.

What you need:

- Copies of the pre-test questionnaire
- Copies of “The History of Mental Illness”

- Copies of “The History of Mental Illness and Treatment in a Nutshell”
- Butcher paper and colored markers