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Mental Illness in America

How Do We Address a Growing Problem?

Many Americans share a sense that something is wrong with how we address mental health and mental illness. More and more of us are taking medications for depression, hyperactivity, and other disorders. Meanwhile, however, dangerous mental illnesses are going undetected and untreated.

According to some, recent violent incidents reflect the need to increase security and increase our ability to detect mental illness. Others point to increasing numbers

of veterans returning from overseas with post-traumatic stress disorders as a major concern. One in five Americans will have mental health problems in any given year. Unaddressed mental illness hurts individuals and their families and results in lost productivity. In rare cases, it can result in violence.

This Issue Advisory presents a framework that asks: How can we reduce the impact of mental illness in America?

Option One: Put safety first

Option	Examples of What Might Be Done	Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider
<p>Individuals with undiagnosed or untreated mental health problems create difficulties for themselves and those around them.</p> <p>While the vast majority of mentally ill people are nonviolent (and in fact more likely to be victims of violence), some are not.</p> <p>This option holds that more preventive action is necessary to deal with mentally ill individuals who are potentially dangerous to themselves or others. We should identify those who need help and intervene where necessary, to prevent them from harming themselves and others. These individuals should be sought out and their needs addressed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require mental health tests for anyone seeking sensitive jobs, such as teaching and police work. Medical boards can penalize professionals who failed to spot warning signs in people who “snap.” Employers can require random, periodic testing for serious mental illness among employees, much like drug screening programs. Individuals can tell professionals about friends and coworkers who are behaving erratically. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many people will be denied rights and privileges, including people who are not dangerous. Health-care providers may begin to overdiagnose mental illness to avoid penalties. This would be an infringement of privacy and could result in many more unemployed or underemployed people who pose no danger to anyone. This may create a culture of informants and turn people against one another.
<p><i>But, this would interfere with people's freedom and some people could be forced into unnecessary treatment.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make it easier for doctors to require medications and to institutionalize potentially violent individuals, even against their will. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The side effects of required medications may be worse than the symptoms they treat. People may be confined unnecessarily.

Option Two:

Ensure mental health services are available to all who need them

Option	Examples of What Might Be Done	Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider
<p>Studies show that people who have mental illness can very often recover with a combination of therapy, medical help, and continued support.</p> <p>Yet access to mental health services varies widely from place to place. Too many people are unable to get the help they need. In some cases they are discouraged from seeking help due to social stigma. In other cases, they cannot get a needed doctor’s referral or their insurance does not cover services.</p> <p>This option holds that people should be encouraged to take control over their own mental health and be provided the tools to do so. We should make sure that everyone who wishes can get the needed help.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make on-demand mental health care a part of all health insurance packages. • Require mental health practitioners to serve residencies in rural and underserved areas. • Reward people who take the initiative to have their mental health assessed and treated. • Provide convenient mental health screening sites throughout the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may increase the cost of even basic insurance beyond what people can bear, resulting in more people going uninsured. • People may avoid entering these professions if they do not have the freedom to choose where to work. • People may become dependent on such rewards and preoccupied with checking their health status. • People may avoid using such screening tools due to privacy concerns or for fear of the possible diagnosis.
<p><i>But, even when mental health services are available to all, many will not seek the help they need.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a media campaign to promote mental health screenings and educate people on the importance of mental health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may create a culture where people find it appropriate to query one another about private issues and may begin diagnosing one another.

This Issue Advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included US politics, economic security, America’s role in the world, and immigration. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website: www.nifi.org.

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Option Three:

Let people plot their own course

Option	Examples of What Might Be Done	Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider
<p>As a society, we have become over-sensitive to behavior that previously would have simply been considered “different.”</p> <p>In the majority of situations, a person’s state of mental health doesn’t affect others. Yet, professionals keep expanding definitions of mental illness to encompass more and more. But not everything has to be treated and medicated. Even when problems exist, people should make their own decisions about whether to seek treatment.</p> <p>This option holds that we should not rely on so many medical approaches. We should reduce our dependence on drugs and allow people the freedom to plot their own course to healthy lives. In many cases, simple changes in lifestyle can improve mental health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Ratchet back diagnostic standards for mental illness so that odd or idiosyncratic behavior is no longer seen as requiring professional treatment. ♦ Doctors can prescribe less medication and focus instead on counseling and talk therapy. ♦ Increase the numbers and visibility of self-help communities, such as twelve-step and other support groups. ♦ Employers can make healthy lifestyle programs like gym memberships and meditation classes available as a routine benefit of employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Some seemingly benign behavior may be an early sign of more serious problems, and people who could be helped may not be reached until it is too late. ♦ Some people who could use medication will not get the relief they need. ♦ Self-help groups often make people feel better yet dispense poor advice that can sometimes be detrimental. ♦ This may be an unfair burden to place on employers.
<p>But, such a “hands off” approach may ignore people who are potentially dangerous and need intervention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Drug companies can be prohibited from advertising prescription-only drugs on television. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This interferes with an individual’s right to learn about help and with a company’s right to make potential patients aware of its products.



Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, DC, and New York City), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public’s role in democracy. It has provided issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums.

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About This Issue Advisory

Increasing attention on mental illness has brought with it concern about potential threats to security and freedom as well as concerns about people's individual well-being. Deliberative forums on this issue will not be easy. It may be helpful to remind participants that the objective of these forums is to begin to work through the tension between collective security, a healthy society, and individual freedoms.

Participants in these forums may become angry, and those with strong feelings may feel attacked by those who hold other points of view. This can sidetrack the deliberation. In productive deliberation, people examine the advantages and disadvantages of different options for addressing a difficult public problem, weighing these against the things they hold deeply valuable.

The framework outlined in this Issue Advisory encompasses several options and provides an alternative means for moving forward in order to avoid polarizing rhetoric. Each option is rooted in a shared concern, proposes a distinct strategy for addressing the problem, and includes roles for citizens to play. Equally important, each option presents the drawbacks inherent in each action. Recognizing these drawbacks allows people to see the trade-offs that they must consider in pursuing any action. It is these drawbacks, in large part, that make coming to shared judgment so difficult—

but ultimately, so productive.

One effective way to hold deliberative forums on this issue:

- Ask people to describe how the issue of mental illness has affected them, their families or friends. Many will have direct experiences. They are likely to mention the concerns identified in the framework.
- Consider each option one at a time, using the actions and drawbacks as examples to illustrate what each option entails.
- Review the conversation as a group, identifying any areas of common ground as well as issues that still must be worked through.

The goal of this framework is to assist people in moving from initial reactions to more reflective judgment. That requires serious deliberation or weighing options for action against the things people hold valuable.