


*Children and Mental Health*
Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General


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CHAPTER 4

ADULTS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Contents

Chapter Overview .............................................................. 225
Mental Health in Adulthood ................................................... 227
Personality Traits ......................................................... 227
Self-Esteem ......................................................... 228
Neuroticism ......................................................... 229
Avoidance .......................................................... 229
Impulsivity .......................................................... 229
Sociopathy .......................................................... 229
Stressful Life Events ......................................................... 230
Past Trauma and Child Sexual Abuse ........................................ 231
Domestic Violence ....................................................... 231
Interventions for Stressful Life Events ........................................ 232
Prevention of Mental Disorders ............................................. 233

Anxiety Disorders .............................................................. 233
Types of Anxiety Disorders ................................................... 233
Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder ........................................... 233
Agoraphobia ............................................................ 234
Specific Phobias ........................................................ 235
Social Phobia ........................................................... 235
Generalized Anxiety Disorder ............................................. 235
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder ............................................ 236
Acute and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders .................................... 237

Etiology of Anxiety Disorders .................................................. 237
Acute Stress Response .................................................... 238
New Views About the Anatomical and Biochemical Basis of Anxiety ............... 239
Neurotransmitter Alterations ............................................. 240
Psychological Views of Anxiety ............................................. 240
## Contents, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Anxiety Disorders</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling and Psychotherapy</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacotherapy</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benzodiazepines</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressants</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buspirone</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combinations of Psychotherapy and Pharmacotherapy</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood Disorders</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complications and Comorbidities</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Depression Versus Normal Sadness</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment: Diagnosis and Syndrome Severity</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Depressive Disorder</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysthymia</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bipolar Disorder</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyclothymia</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential Diagnosis</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etiology of Mood Disorders</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biologic Factors in Depression</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monoamine Hypothesis</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolving Views of Depression</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety and Depression</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial and Genetic Factors in Depression</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressful Life Events</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Factors</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament and Personality</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic Factors in Depression and Bipolar Disorder</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Mood Disorders</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stages of Therapy</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute Phase Therapy</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuation Phase Therapy</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Phase Therapies</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Treatments for Episodes of Depression and Mania</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents, continued

Treatment of Major Depressive Episodes ................................................................. 262
  Pharmacotherapies ................................................................................................. 262
  Alternate Pharmacotherapies ................................................................................. 263
  Augmentation Strategies ....................................................................................... 265
  Psychotherapy and Counseling ............................................................................. 265
  Bipolar Depression ............................................................................................... 265
  Pharmacotherapy, Psychosocial Therapy, and Multimodal Therapy ..................... 266
  Preventing Relapse of Major Depressive Episodes .................................................. 267

Treatment of Mania ................................................................................................ 267
  Acute Phase Efficacy ............................................................................................. 267
  Maintenance Treatment to Prevent Recurrences of Mania ...................................... 268

Service Delivery for Mood Disorders ..................................................................... 269

Schizophrenia .......................................................................................................... 269
  Overview ................................................................................................................ 269
    Cognitive Dysfunction .......................................................................................... 272
    Functional Impairment ......................................................................................... 272
    Cultural Variation ................................................................................................. 272
    Prevalence ............................................................................................................ 273
      Prevalence of Comorbid Medical Illness ............................................................ 273
  Course and Recovery ............................................................................................... 274
    Gender and Age at Onset ..................................................................................... 275
  Etiology of Schizophrenia ....................................................................................... 276
  Interventions ........................................................................................................... 279
    Pharmacotherapy .................................................................................................. 280
    Ethnopsychopharmacology ................................................................................... 282
    Psychosocial Treatments ....................................................................................... 283
      Psychotherapy ..................................................................................................... 283
      Family Interventions ........................................................................................... 283
      Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Skills Development ......................................... 283
      Coping and Self-Monitoring ............................................................................... 284
      Vocational Rehabilitation .................................................................................... 285

Service Delivery ....................................................................................................... 285
  Case Management .................................................................................................. 286
  Assertive Community Treatment ............................................................................. 286
  Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services ..................................................................... 287
  Inpatient Hospitalization and Community Alternatives for Crisis Care .................. 287
  Services for Substance Abuse and Severe Mental Illness ........................................ 288
**Contents, continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Services And Supports</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Self-Help</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer-Operated Programs</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Advocacy</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Self-Help</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Advocacy</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income, Education, and Employment</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Coverage</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating Service Systems</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adults and Mental Health

Adulthood is a time for achieving productive vocations and for sustaining close relationships at home and in the community. These aspirations are readily attainable for adults who are mentally healthy. And they are within reach for adults who have mental disorders, thanks to major strides in diagnosis, treatment, and service delivery.

This chapter reviews the current state of knowledge about mental health in adults, along with selected mental disorders: anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and schizophrenia. These disorders are highlighted largely because of their prevalence in the population and the burden of illness associated with each. The chapter then turns to service delivery, describing the effective organization and range of services for adults with the most severe mental disorders. It also reviews an array of other services and supports designed to provide comprehensive care beyond the formal therapeutic setting.

Chapter Overview

Mental health in adulthood is characterized by the successful performance of mental function, enabling individuals to cope with adversity and to flourish in their education, vocation, and personal relationships. These are the areas of functioning most widely recognized by the mental health field. Yet, from the perspective of different cultures, these measures may define the concept of mental health too narrowly. As noted in Chapter 2, many groups, particularly ethnic and racial minority group members, also emphasize community, spiritual, and religious ties as necessary for mental health. The mental health profession is becoming more aware of the importance of reaching out to other cultures, an innovation termed “linguistically and culturally competent services” is pertinent both to the field's conception of mental health and to the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders.

An assortment of traits or personal characteristics have been viewed as contributing to mental health, including self-esteem, optimism, and resilience (Alloy & Abramson, 1988; Seligman, 1991; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 1994; Beardslee & Vaillant, 1997). These and related traits are seen as sources of personal resilience needed to weather the storms of stressful life events.

Stressful life events in adulthood include the breakup of intimate romantic relationships, death of a family member or friend, economic hardship, role conflict, work overload, racism and discrimination, poor physical health, accidental injuries, and intentional assaults on physical safety (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Kreiger et al., 1993). Stressful life events in adulthood also may reflect past events. Severe trauma in childhood, including sexual and physical abuse, may persist as a stressor into adulthood, or may make the individual more vulnerable to ongoing stresses (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986).

Although some kinds of stressful life events are encountered almost universally, certain demographic groups have greater exposure and/or vulnerability to their cumulative impact. These groups include women, younger adults, unmarried adults, African Americans, and individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Ulbrich et al., 1989; McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Turner et al., 1995; Miranda & Green, 1999).

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorders in adults (Regier et al., 1990). The anxiety disorders affect twice as many women as men. A broad category, anxiety disorders include panic disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder,