Session One - What Causes Mental Illness

Materials Needed:
Handout C: What is Mental Illness?
Handout D: Biopsychosocial Model and Vulnerability-Stress Model

I.   Definition of mental illness

***Distribute* Handout C: What is Mental Illness?** (Bisbee, 1991)

1. Every organ in the human body has a function, and numerous problems can arise with each organ. The specific problem with the organ and the resultant disorder dictate the appropriate treatments. This chart places mental illness in the context of other forms of illness.

2. Mental illness is brain dysfunction, affecting:

    a. Perception – People may experience the world with their senses (vision, smell, taste, touch, hearing) in unusual and/or strange ways (e.g., hearing voices, seeing things that others do not see).

    b. Thinking – Thoughts may occur very quickly/slowly, may be poorly organized, confusing, illogical, irrational, etc.

    c. Mood – All human beings experience a variety of moods (e.g., depression, anxiety, mania) and mood changes. Mental illness can emerge when symptoms cause significant distress over time and impair one's ability to function in daily life.

    d.   <u>Behavior</u> – People's behavior may be quite bizarre and confusing for those who do not understand mental illness (e.g., someone with PTSD hiding in the closet when he/she hears helicopters; an individual with obsessive-compulsive disorder checking the stove 20 times before leaving the house; a depressed individual lying in bed for days at a time)

3.   Effective treatment of mental illness includes a combination of several elements: medications, healthy life style, consumer and family education, job training/coaching, peer support, and psychotherapy.

II.   <u>Categories of mental illness</u>

Many different classification systems for mental disorders exist, but some general categories include:

Write on board (and very briefly define each disorder):

Schizophrenia
Major depressive disorder
Bipolar disorder/manic-depressive disorder
Anxiety disorders (including PTSD)
Substance-use disorders
Organic disorders (e.g., Alzheimer's disease)
Personality disorders

III.   <u>Causes of mental illness</u>

Given the limited time and the fact that participants' family members have different mental illnesses, discuss overall themes in the causes of mental illness, rather than addressing the specifics of each disorder. Make time available at the end of the session for specific questions.

> **?**

Discussion Question: What are some commonly held beliefs about the causes of mental illness?

<u>Examples</u>:

1.   Mental illness does not exist.
2.   Mental illness is a normal response to a sick society.
3.   Mental illness is caused by the devil, demons, or turning away from God.
4.   Mental illness is caused by poor parenting.
5.   Mental illness is caused by being lazy and weak.
6.   Mental illness is caused by poor family communication
7.   Others?

A. Over the years, different theories have been proposed regarding the causes of mental illness. Myths such as these develop because people need an explanation for confusing behaviors. The myths can be transmitted down through many generations without being checked for accuracy. Sometimes myths are a means of denial or of avoiding responsibility for mental illness in a family.

B. What science does know:

Distribute **Handout D: Biopsychosocial Model and Vulnerability-Stress Model** (adapted from Bisbee, 1991)

1. Biopsychosocial model: Mental illnesses have several dimensions that are helpful to review.

Write on board: Bio, Psych, Social
Explain that each area can contribute to an individual's level of risk for developing a mental illness.

BIO → biology – Refers to the structure of the brain, chemicals in the brain, genes inherited from parents, etc. Science is gaining more knowledge about the large influence of biology on the risk for acquiring a mental illness.

PSYCH → psychology – Refers to personality, personal beliefs, thoughts, experiences, etc.

SOCIAL → sociology – Refers to environmental stress (e.g., trauma of war, assault), cultural factors, discrimination, etc.

Therefore … Treatment needs to be aimed at all three of these areas:

BIO → medication, nutrition, general physical health

PSYCH → education (SAFE Program), psychotherapy, coping skills

SOCIAL → environmental management, stigma of mental illness, advocacy

2. Vulnerability-stress model

    a. One can inherit a predisposition or increased vulnerability (diathesis) to a certain illness (or class of illnesses). The importance of family history with some medical problems (e.g., cancer) is well known. Investigating family history with mental illness can similarly provide very valuable information. Having a family history of a mental illness does not mean you will necessarily get the illness, but you do have an increased risk.

      Example: schizophrenia:
      1% incidence in general population
      10% if a first degree relative (parent, sibling) has the disorder

      Fraternal twins: 10-15% incidence rate
      Identical twins: 40-65% incidence rate (Cardno & Gottesman, 2000)

      Precisely what is inherited that makes a person more likely to get schizophrenia is still unknown, but research continues to study the various causes of mental illnesses.

    b. In addition, life experience (stress) can trigger the emergence of a mental illness. All people struggle to cope with major life events; however, individuals with a predisposition for mental illness can have a harder time with the event, and some symptoms of mental illness may emerge.

?

Discussion Questions:

- Do you have any questions about either model?

- Do you have questions about the causes of any specific disorder(s)?