

scan club

A NEWSLETTER FOR SCAN HEALTH PLAN MEMBERS

MENTAL HEALTH EDITION 2019



Judy's Story: My Family Secret

You may recognize Judy (her photo is on page 2). A SCAN employee before retirement, she appeared in several SCAN TV commercials and her photo was in many of our print materials. Judy now works with us as a Senior Advocate, and her upbeat nature makes her a natural on the phone as she talks with her fellow members.

Judy has also helped host many SCAN TeleTalks—those large-scale conference calls we hold on various topics. But it wasn't until Judy hosted a SCAN TeleTalk on mental health that she admitted something to her co-workers: This topic was personal.

"My father suffered from depression so severe he tried to take his own life," Judy says. "My parents never talked about it. I didn't learn until years later that he actually attempted suicide three times. He never got professional help. It was a taboo topic."

Writing a New Family History

It wasn't until Judy was in her early twenties and newly married that she realized she, too, might have a mental health issue.

When Judy brought it up at her next doctor visit, she burst into tears. "He told me I needed to see someone. I didn't hesitate. I started going to a psychologist." She said the relief was almost immediate.

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"I grew up in a household that didn't talk about feelings. My husband was uncomfortable talking about feelings. I learned how to do that in therapy," Judy says. "It helped me to put things into perspective. I learned how to communicate. That was when I started to get better."

Finding What Works

Judy's marriage didn't last, but she says that wasn't the source of her depression. "We weren't right together but splitting up didn't cure my depression." In fact, Judy says her doctor recommended she take a prescription anti-depressant. "I had to try a few different ones, but I found one that works for me with no side effects. You have to experiment."

People who know Judy use words like "bubbly," "warm" and "always smiling" to describe her. And she is. She's also spent most of her life living with chronic depression.

After a while, Judy noticed something. "One day I just went: 'Wait, I feel pretty good.' It was so gradual." She admits she'd rather not be on medications, but she tried going off them at one point and fell back into a depression. "I've talked with my doctors over the years and realize that I will need to be on medication for the rest of my life. My mental health issue is very likely hereditary, and I saw what can happen when you don't take care of it."

A Healthier Perspective

Today, Judy knows herself well enough to reach out to a therapist when she needs one. "Sometimes there's a trigger, like a serious health issue—other times it comes up out of the blue," she explains. "I found that talking with a professional helps me have a healthier perspective on whatever may be happening."

She also now knows her warning signs. "I might be down or have a few days of sadness, but that's not what I call depression," Judy says. "It's when it goes on for too long that I have to pay attention." She knows it's time to talk with a professional when she notices:

1. **No energy.** "I just don't feel up to doing anything."
2. **No interest in being social.** "I start turning down invitations and stop reaching out to people."
3. **Negative thoughts.** "This tape of negative thoughts about myself replays over and over."

Judy's advice to others who might see themselves in her story is to talk to their doctors.

"Why keep suffering? It's a disease. It doesn't go away on its own and you can only ignore it for so long," she says. "If it bothers you to call it depression, then don't label it. Use whatever words are acceptable to you. Just start the conversation."

Facts About Depression

More than 2 million American seniors have some form of depression

80 percent of the time, depression is treatable

68 percent of seniors know little or almost nothing about depression

58 percent of seniors believe it's "normal" to get depressed as they grow older
(Truth: common, yes; normal, no)

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Mental Health America

What to Look for

There are many different types of mental disorders, and each person can feel them differently. Still, there are some common warning signs:

- Your sleep, appetite, sex drive or other regular parts of your life are being affected in a negative way.
 - You find it overwhelming to do simple, everyday activities, like grocery shopping or fixing dinner.
 - You don't want to see or talk to anyone.
 - You feel sad or angry most of the time.
 - You often have extreme mood swings, from feeling on top of the world one minute to deeply depressed the next.
 - You can't concentrate and feel out of control.
 - Your heart races and muscles ache, and you break out sweating for no reason.
 - People, places or things make you afraid without a reasonable cause.
- ▶ If you have these symptoms for more than two weeks and they aren't getting better, take the first step to getting your life back on track by making an appointment with your doctor or a mental health professional.

MEDICAL DIRECTOR MESSAGE

Healthy Mind, Healthy Body

If you have a common condition like arthritis, you probably talk about it with your family, friends and your doctor. You ask for help managing the pain and loosening up your joints so you can take part in the activities you enjoy. But what if you have depression? Do you talk openly about that, too? Do you ask for help managing the condition so you can continue to enjoy life?

Many people don't. Seniors in particular will assume their mental challenges are part of getting older. The truth is, although there are some expected changes that come with age, being depressed or anxious or afraid all the time are not among them!

That's why we're using this issue of *SCAN Club* to shine a light on mental health issues. Not only are they treatable, but mental health is closely linked to your physical health, too. For example*:

- People who have had a heart attack often go through depression. And, people who are depressed have higher rates of heart disease, stroke and Alzheimer's disease.
- Up to 50 percent of cancer patients have some type of mental health issue, most commonly anxiety and depression.
- Women with metastatic cancer live longer when they receive mental health treatment.
- Untreated depression often leads to physical pain, substance use and a shorter life.

Many Options for Treatment

Luckily, there are many ways to treat a mental health issue, including simple things you can do on your own. For example, you can try:

- ▶ Reaching out to friends
- ▶ Doing something that brings you joy
- ▶ Volunteering

Of course, if you can't find the energy or will to do anything at all, that's a sign that you need to talk with your doctor. We've included some ways to start the conversation on page 4.

We hope you find this issue of *SCAN Club* helpful. We always welcome your feedback. Write or email us care of *SCAN Club* Editor—you'll find the information on the back of this newsletter.

In good health,

Magda Lenartowicz, MD
SCAN Medical Director



A note here: If you've tried therapy before and it didn't work for you or you didn't like the therapist, don't let that stop you from trying again. One of my co-workers likes to compare therapy to something many of us have experienced. He says: "Just as there are good and bad hairdressers, there are good and bad therapists. You don't get one bad haircut and say: 'Well, I'm never doing that again!' You try other hairdressers until you find one that works for you."

* www.heart.org; www.hopkinsmedicine.org; www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Is depression a normal part of getting older? Listen to learn.



Tune in to SCAN's Healthy at Any Age podcasts on mental health to find out. There are four episodes in this series, which cover such topics as how to identify a mental health issue and how to manage grief and loss.

The podcasts range from 15 to 25 minutes each. Find them all on the SCAN website: scanhealthplan.com. Just type "podcasts" into the search bar at the top of any page. You'll also find SCAN podcasts on caregiving and preventing falls.



A podcast is like a radio show you can listen to at any time.

How to Talk to Your Doctor About Your Mental Health

I'm worried that I might need to talk to a doctor about thoughts I've been having. But the idea of talking to someone, anyone, is overwhelming. What am I going to tell her—that I'm afraid I'm going crazy?



The first thing to understand is that **you're not alone**. Emotions are a normal part of life, but they can become too much to handle for many people and help is needed. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it's estimated that 20 percent of people age 55 and older experience some type of mental health issue.*

It might help to know that **while you may be embarrassed to talk about what you're feeling, your doctor is not**. He or she is used to discussing most mental health issues with patients and getting them the help they need.

Perhaps most important is that **not getting help from a professional can be dangerous**. Just as not getting a physical condition taken care of can lead to serious problems, not treating a mental issue can make your symptoms worse and lead to other physical, mental and social problems.

Keep these tips in mind when talking with your doctor:

Be direct and honest. You might say, "I haven't been feeling like myself lately. I think I might be depressed."

Be as detailed as you can. Are you having the feelings all of the time or only in certain situations? The more information you can give your doctor, the easier it will be to come up with a plan that gets you feeling better.

Share your background. That includes any family history of mental illness, even substance abuse.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Here are some that might help guide the conversation:

- Could a medical condition or a medication I'm taking be causing me to feel this way?
- I think I'd like to talk to a mental health professional. Do you agree?
- What else can I do to manage my symptoms? Is there a medication that will help? If so, how long will it take to work?
- What should I tell my family and friends?
- What can I expect to happen next?

* [cdc.gov/aging/pdf/mental_health.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/pdf/mental_health.pdf)

Your SCAN Mental Health Benefit

As a SCAN member, you can receive care from psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to diagnose and treat conditions important to your emotional health and well-being.

All SCAN plans cover:

- **Outpatient mental health services** for individual or group visits with a clinical psychologist or other mental health professional to treat depression, anxiety and some other conditions.
- **Outpatient psychiatric services** with a licensed psychiatrist who specializes in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of mental disorders.
- **Inpatient mental healthcare services** in an inpatient psychiatric hospital or a separate unit of a medical hospital.
- **Outpatient partial hospitalizations** are programs which do not have overnight hospital stays but offer more intense treatment than you would get in a doctor's office or other outpatient setting.

More to Know

Your copayment to see a mental health specialist may not be the same as what you pay to see other kinds of specialists.

Some plans let you self-refer to a mental health specialist.

Learn more about your specific benefits and copays: Check your Evidence of Coverage or call SCAN Member Services—the number is on the back of this newsletter.

Mariana's Story: My Invisible Illness

SCAN member Mariana, 74, is able to do what seemed impossible to her a year ago. "Back then, I wouldn't have been able to talk to you like this because I couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone," Mariana remembers.

Mariana had chronic pain for years, but there was something else that was keeping her from being able to do simple, everyday things, like getting out of bed in the morning, taking a shower or even being able to talk about what she was feeling. "I couldn't speak without crying and felt like the earth was swallowing me," she says. "I didn't feel like even being here anymore."

“Finally, I just couldn't hide anymore. It's okay if people know. It's not a secret. People do get sick and have these kinds of problems.”

— Mariana, SCAN member

Overwhelmed, Anxious and Isolated

Mariana had some depression before, but she was always able to manage it with medications prescribed by her doctor. That changed in 2018 when her husband, Tony, became very sick and was eventually put on dialysis.

"Watching him go through that, while dealing with my own ailments, was a turning point. It was just too much for me," Mariana says. "I felt so sick inside, and my depression and anxiety escalated fast. The medications weren't working for me anymore, my hair was falling out and everything hurt. It was like sinking into a hole with no light and no end, and you never want to come out."

One of the feelings Mariana remembers most about this time was how alone she felt. While nurses were coming to the house regularly to check on her husband and care for his physical illness, "with me it was an illness that nobody could see," she says.

Finding Her Way Back

With encouragement from her daughter, Mariana finally realized she had to do something, even if it was only to get out of bed and take a shower. "I didn't want to, but I tried it and then I said, 'Okay, that wasn't so bad.'"

She says that gave her the confidence to try more. "With the most energy I could find in my body, I got in the car and drove to the market, hoping nobody would look at me because I was sure they would be able to tell that I was going crazy. But I went and came back, and I thought, 'That wasn't so bad, either.' So, even though every step is painful, each one will take you to where you want to be."

One important step on that path was when SCAN Peer Advocate MaryKay Kubota and Mariana's daughter helped her find the "right" psychiatrist. Together, they came up with a treatment plan that Mariana says "brought the lightness back to me."

"I still have all my pains and problems, but I can handle them," Mariana says. "So, in that sense I am okay, and I am very thankful for that. As long as I'm here, I want to enjoy my life."

If we didn't ever feel sad, nervous, afraid or angry, we wouldn't be human. These emotions are as much a part of life as joy, happiness and love. But when these feelings take over and won't go away, living a healthy, satisfying and productive life can seem impossible. That's when it's time to call in a professional's help.

Facts About Anxiety

Nearly one half of the people diagnosed with depression are **also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder**.

More than 40 million adults in the U.S. experience some type of anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S.

Fewer than 40 percent of people with an anxiety disorder get treated for it, even though **anxiety disorders are highly treatable**.

Source: Anxiety and Depression Association of America; National Institute of Health



Beyond Depression and Anxiety

From broken legs to heart disease to eczema, there are many physical illnesses and each can affect people in different ways. It's the same for mental illness, too.

Many types of mental problems appear at any time but some in particular can show up later in life. Anxiety is one of the most common mental illnesses with seniors, and depression is close behind. In many cases, the two go hand in hand.

Another condition that affects seniors as well as younger people is bipolar disorder. It's not as common, but as much as 25 percent of the population diagnosed with bipolar disorder is age 60 or older.*

How Do You Know If It's Bipolar Disorder?

Another name for bipolar disorder is manic-depressive disorder. It's a good description of the extreme emotional highs and lows that a person with bipolar disorder feels. Some common symptoms are:

- Unusual shifts in mood, energy and activity levels
- Intense emotions that can't be controlled
- Extreme changes in sleep patterns
- Unusual behavior that's drastically different from the way most people act

▶ If you or a loved one feels this way for more than a few weeks, talk with a mental health specialist. He or she can help decide if it's because of a physical problem, side effects from a medication or something more serious.

* www.healthline.com/health/bipolar-disorder/later-in-life



John's Story: Problems New and Old

Living with any mental health issue can be a challenge for anyone, but coping can seem impossible for people who have multiple physical and mental illnesses at the same time.

SCAN member John knows this all too well. Throughout his 77 years, John has endured a long list of physical injuries, addictions, medical procedures and emotional distresses. The searing pain in his lower back, for example, is a lasting reminder of an accident he had when he was young. A history of drug use is behind him but he still struggles with temptation when times get hard. Poor health and age have added new obstacles, including incontinence. After John and his wife of many years separated recently, he admitted that he feels depressed most of the time, and has often thought of ending his life.

Approximately **10.2 million** adults have mental health and addiction disorders at the same time.*

Issues, Illnesses and Injuries Add Up

John's experience shows that it isn't always clear what causes mental distress. It could be that the symptoms have crept up over time so all you know is you don't feel like yourself. It gets even more complicated if you have physical problems or have had stressful events in your life. These factors could be disguising or imitating a mental health issue that needs to be treated.

If, like John, you are living with more than one health issue, make sure that any doctor you see knows about all of your conditions. Keep a list of the care you receive from each doctor and of all of the prescription and over-the-counter drugs you take. Share it with your doctors each time you see them.

Where to Find Hope and Help

John says he still struggles with his depression every day but he has found that talking with others about what he's feeling does help. He says his sponsor from Alcoholics Anonymous is there to provide support in hard times. And, during a recent phone conversation with a SCAN Peer Advocate, John said that just having someone to listen to his problems made him feel better.

If you ever feel you need to talk to someone right away, there are hotlines that can connect you with a person trained to help in crisis. There's even one specifically for people age 60 and older and people living with disabilities: Institute on Aging's Friendship Line—see the information below.

* <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>

Medications and Your Mental Health ???

Dear Dr. Magda,

About three weeks ago, I saw a psychiatrist and she prescribed a pill to help me with my anxiety. I've been taking it just as she told me, but it doesn't seem to be doing anything except making me a bit drowsy. Can I just stop taking it if it's not working?

Signed, Hoping to Stop



Dr. Magda Lenartowicz is one of SCAN's medical directors.

Dear Hoping to Stop,

Good for you for paying attention to the side effects! I can understand why you're thinking about giving up on your medicine. When you're not feeling well, it's natural to want to see results right away. But talk to your doctor first. She may have a simple solution. For example, if the pill makes you sleepy, ask her if you can take it before bedtime.

Did your doctor tell you that the medications we use to treat depression, anxiety and other mental health issues can take time to build up in your system? For some, it can take six to eight weeks. So, the reason you're not feeling better yet might be because the medication hasn't kicked in.

Also, because these drugs take time to build up in your system, stopping them suddenly can make you feel worse and can be dangerous. That's another reason to talk to your doctor. If stopping the medication is the right thing to do, she can help you do so safely.

It might take several tries with different doses and different medications before you find what works best for you. Remember, your symptoms took time to develop, so finding the best way to treat them will, too.

Best, *Dr. Magda*

▶ If you have a general health question for Dr. Magda, send it to the SCAN Club address or email on the back of this newsletter. Some questions received may be answered in a future issue of SCAN Club. If you have a question that's urgent or specific to your care, talk with your doctor.

▶ **If you're thinking about harming yourself or someone else, get help immediately by calling 911 or an emergency hotline like these:**

Institute on Aging Friendship Line
1-800-971-0016

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255 (TTY: 1-800-799-4889)

Need Assistance? SCAN Health Plan® is here to help.



Sales Information

1-800-547-1317; TTY: 711
8 a.m.–8 p.m. Pacific Time (PT)
Monday–Friday



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www.scanhealthplan.com



Member Services

MemberServices@scanhealthplan.com

1-800-559-3500; TTY: 711

8 a.m.–8 p.m. Pacific Time (PT)
7 days a week from Oct. 1–March 31
Monday–Friday from April 1–Sept. 30

Note: Between April 1 and Sept. 30, messages received during weekends and holidays will be returned within one business day.

SCAN Health Plan® is an HMO plan with a Medicare contract. Enrollment in SCAN Health Plan depends on contract renewal. This information is not a complete description of benefits. Call 1-800-559-3500 (TTY: 711) for more information. Other providers and pharmacies are available in our network.



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Health and wellness or prevention information

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