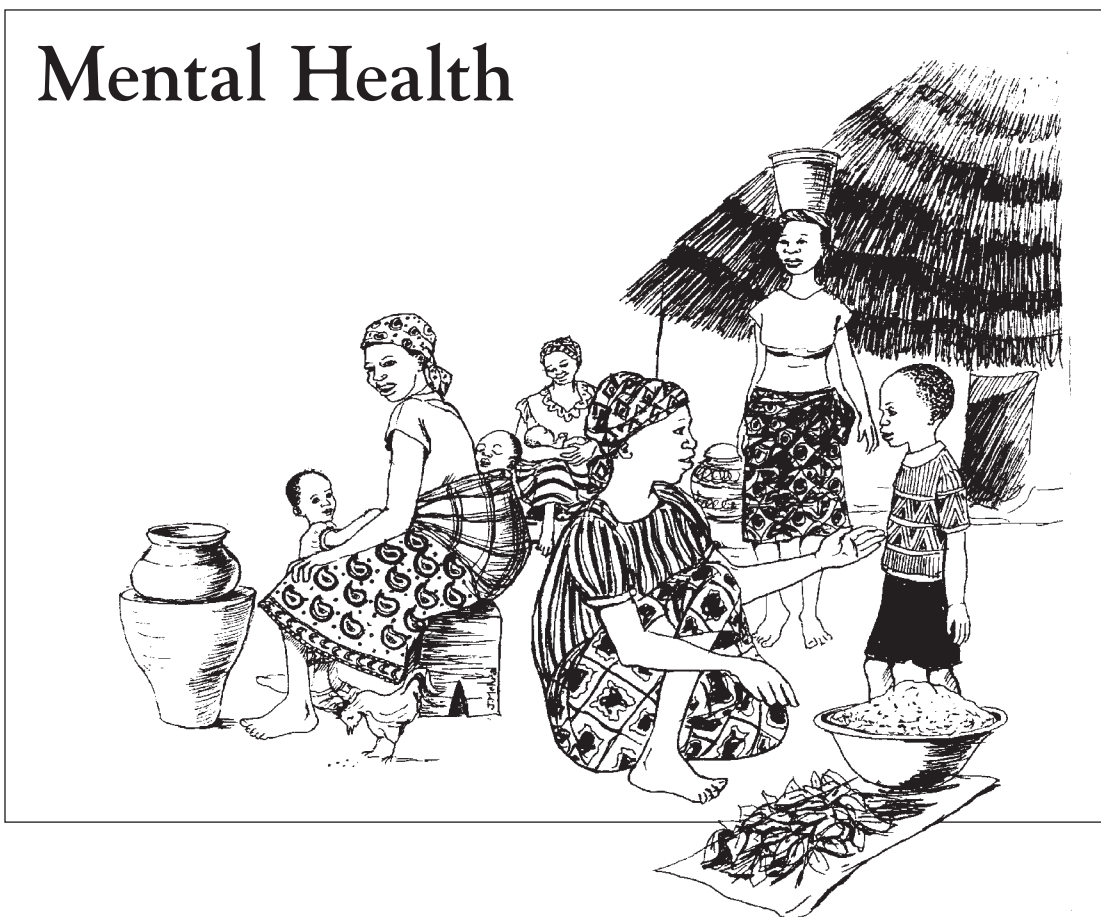


# Chapter 27

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# Mental Health



**W**hen a woman's mind and spirit are doing well, she has the strength to take care of herself and others, to feel and manage her emotions, and to recover from loss, frustration, and disappointment. This allows her to plan for the future, handle new situations, and have good relationships with other people.

We all have some difficult times. But if a hard time continues and keeps someone from carrying out their daily activities—for example, if they become so distressed that they cannot care for themselves or their family—they may have a mental health problem. These problems can be harder to identify than problems in the body, which we can often see or touch. Yet mental health problems need attention and treatment just as physical problems do.

This chapter explains how the conditions of our lives put pressure—stress—on our mental health and it offers suggestions for how to help yourself or help others when this happens.

► *Mental health and physical health are equally important and each builds upon the other.*

► *If someone suddenly begins acting strangely, it might or might not be a mental health problem. Physical illness, chemical or pesticide poisoning, side effects of medicines, or alcohol or drug use may be the cause.*

## Self-esteem



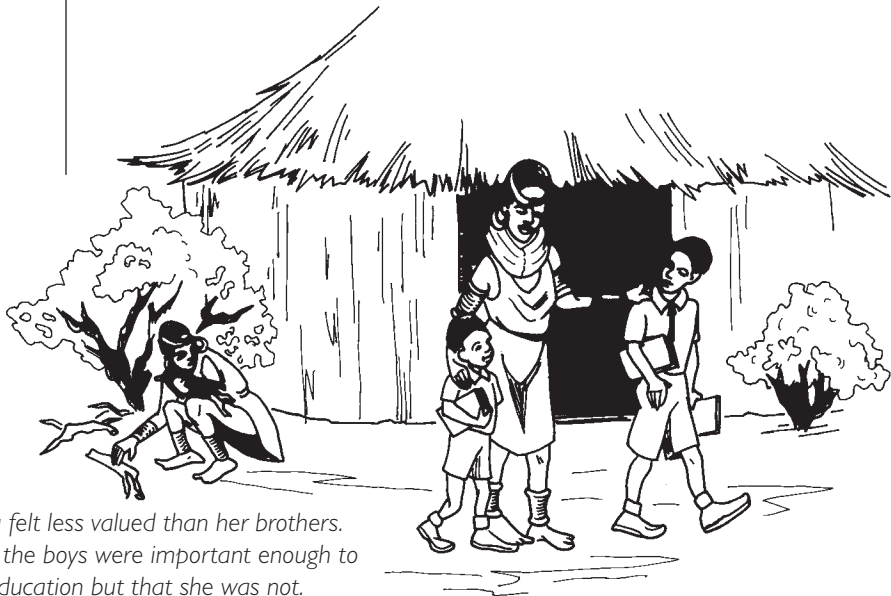
low status of women

**W**hen a woman feels she makes a valuable contribution to her family and community, she is said to have good self-esteem. Good self-esteem reminds us we deserve to be treated with respect. It is an important part of good mental health.

Self-esteem begins to develop in childhood and in part comes from how we are treated by important people in our lives—parents and other family, neighbors, teachers, and community and spiritual leaders. If these people treat a child as someone who deserves their attention, if they praise the child for doing something well, and if they encourage a child to try things that are difficult, the child will feel valued.

Since women are often valued less than men, girls may have a hard time developing good self-esteem. For example, if their brothers are given more education or more food, if they are criticized a lot or if their hard work goes unnoticed, then they are more likely to grow up feeling unworthy. As women, they may not believe they deserve to be treated well by their husbands, to eat as much food, to have health care when they are sick, or to learn new skills. Women may even think that their lack of importance in the family and community is natural and right—when, in fact, it is unfair and can be changed.

A woman with good self-esteem will feel more able to manage daily problems and will be better able to work for changes that can improve her life and her community.



*As a child, Malika felt less valued than her brothers. The family thought the boys were important enough to be given an education but that she was not.*

## Building self-esteem

Building self-esteem is not just deciding to value yourself more. It often means overcoming deeply held negative beliefs about yourself that are so much a part of you that you may not even be aware of them.

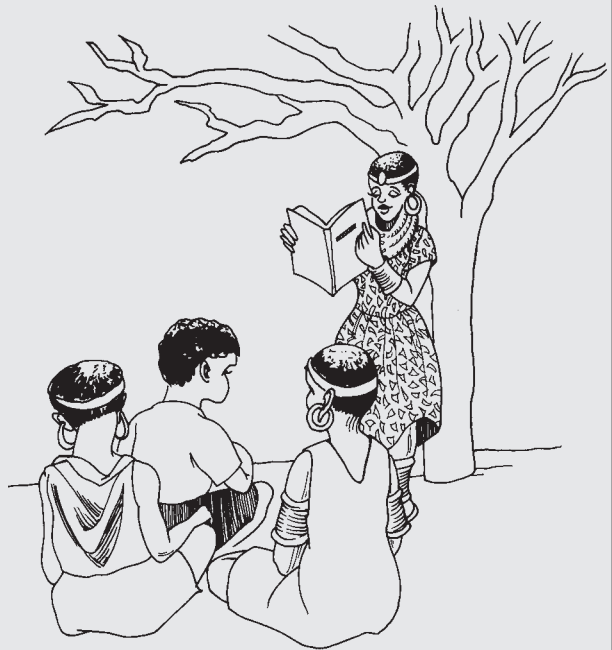
Improved self-esteem often comes from experiences that allow people to see themselves in new ways. Change can come through building on strengths you already have, like an ability to form close, supportive relationships with others, or from learning new skills.

As a child, Malika was expected to be quiet and do as she was told. When she was 18, her parents forced her to marry a military man. Malika was in love with someone else but her parents did not care. The military man was an important man.

After they had been married for a number of years and Malika had given birth to 4 children, her husband stopped coming home at night. Friends told her that he had been with other women. Malika complained to her mother and her mother told her to just live with it—this was how her life would be. Eventually, Malika's husband moved out to live with his girlfriend. Malika felt worthless and this made her very sad.

One day, Malika was given the opportunity to enter a program where she would learn to take care of children at the community school. She decided to try, even though she had never worked away from home before. Learning new skills and being with the children and other women in training changed Malika. She began to see she had value outside her marriage and she could have useful and fulfilling work. She also made new friends. Malika then began to think about what she could do for her family and what she hoped to accomplish in her own life

*As an adult, Malika learned new skills and began to value herself more.*



## Common Stresses Affecting Mental Health

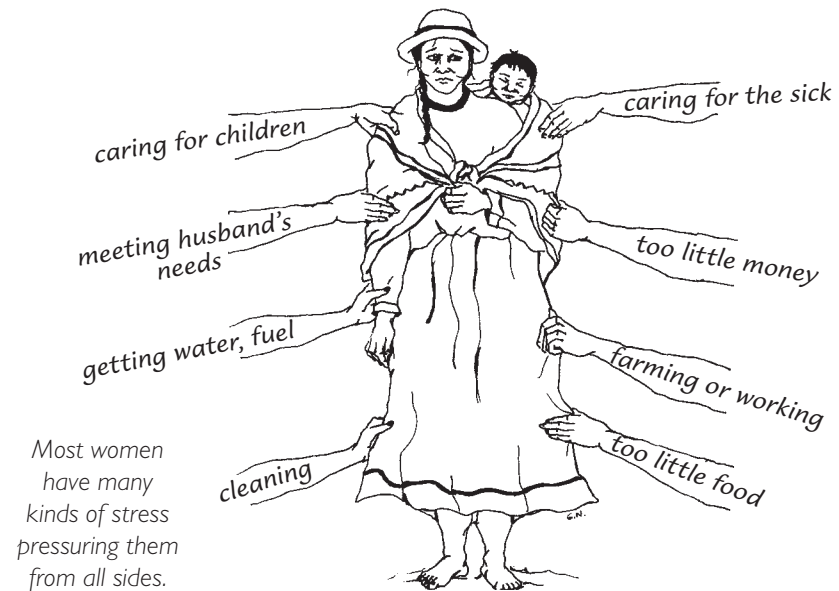
► *Taking more control over their own lives can bring women better mental health.*

► *It is easy not to notice the stress in daily life because it is always there. But it can take a lot of effort to get through each day.*

**F**or most people, life has ups and downs, happiness as well as sadness, easy days and hard ones, and both joyful and difficult events. When facing common conditions of life that can affect mental health, some people adjust more easily while others have a harder time. The stresses discussed in the next few pages are common causes of mental health problems but not the only ones. Sometimes we just do not know why someone develops a mental health problem.

### STRESS IN DAILY LIFE

Daily life puts pressure on a person's body and mind (stress). Stress can be caused by illness or by too much work. It can come from emotional events like conflict in the family or being blamed for problems you have no control over. It can come from social conditions like feeling in physical danger because of your gender or being discriminated against because of your race or ethnicity. Even welcome events like a new baby or getting a job can be stressful because they create big changes in your life.



Facing a lot of stress every day and for a long time can be overwhelming. It may be worse if someone has been taught to take care of others first and neglect their own needs, as most women have. With little time to rest or to enjoy things that could lessen stress, a woman may ignore signs of illness or overwork. And many women have little power to change this situation



*When I can't sleep, my husband calls it my "nervous condition." But I think I have too much work.*

*Women are often made to feel they are weak or ill when the real problem is something that is unfair or needs to change in their lives.*

Sudden painful or tragic events are also stresses that can affect mental health.

## LOSS AND DEATH

When a woman loses someone or something important—a loved one, her work, her home, or a close friendship—she may feel overwhelmed with grief. It can also be a loss to become very ill or develop a disability.

Grieving is a natural response that helps a person adjust to loss. But if a woman faces many losses at once or if she already has a lot of daily stress, grief and loss can have more lasting effects on her mental health. This can also happen if a woman is unable to grieve in traditional ways. For example, if she was forced to leave her family or community, she may be without the people or places that would usually help her grieve.

## CHANGES IN A WOMAN'S LIFE AND COMMUNITY

In many parts of the world, communities are changing rapidly because of economic conditions, climate change and its disasters, or armed conflict. Many of these changes force people to alter their entire way of life. For example:

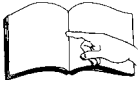


*My name is Edhina. When the war started, soldiers came and forced the men in our village to fight. Some of the women were raped. We fled into the mountains where it was hard to find food. Now we live as refugees in a camp just across the border. We usually have enough to eat but many people are sick. The camp is crowded with strangers. Every day I wonder—will I ever see my home again?*

*My name is Jurema. Every year our land produced less. We had to borrow money to buy seeds and even tried buying fertilizer but we could never grow enough to pay back the bank. We were finally forced to leave our land. Now we live in a shack at the edge of the city. Every morning when I wake up, I listen for the birds that had always greeted the morning. Then I remember—there are no birds here. There is only another day of scrubbing other people's floors.*



When families and communities break apart or when life changes so much that old ways of coping do not work any more, mental health problems are common.



violence against women, 313

rape and sexual violence, 327



## TRAUMA

When something terrible happens to a person or to someone close to them, this can cause trauma. Common causes of trauma are violence in the home, rape, war, torture, and disasters (natural or related to climate change). Trauma can be caused by a single event or by someone's ongoing life conditions.

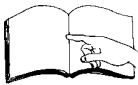
Trauma threatens a person's physical and mental well-being. As a result, a person can feel unsafe, insecure, helpless, and unable to trust the world or the people around them. Recovering from trauma can take a long time and is not easy for most people. Trauma that took place in the past can still be a problem for someone, especially if they never had help to heal from it. Many adults are affected by childhood events that happened before they were old enough to understand them.

## OTHER PROBLEMS THAT CAN AFFECT MENTAL HEALTH

See these chapters for other common causes of mental health problems and ways to help:

- violence against women (Chapter 1)
- rape and sexual violence (Chapter 19)
- challenges at work (Chapter 26)
- alcohol and other drugs (Chapter 28)
- being displaced from where you live (Chapter 29)

Learning you have a new disability or a serious illness, such as advanced HIV disease or cancer, is a time when people need mental health support. Often, people who have a new baby or those who lost a pregnancy also need mental health support.



mental health support during and after pregnancy, 98

mental health in people with HIV, 296

It is sometimes hard to know if someone has a mental health problem. When you are helping someone, remember:

- Most people have some of the signs listed below at different times in their lives because everyone faces problems at one time or another.
- Different people can react very differently to the same condition or event. A situation that feels manageable for one person may be a crisis for someone else.
- Signs of mental health problems can vary from community to community. Behavior that looks strange to an outsider may be normal within a community's traditions or values.

Although there are many kinds of mental health problems, depression, anxiety, and reactions to trauma affect many people. Alcohol and drug use can also lead to or be a sign of mental health problems (see page 437).

## **DEPRESSION (EXTREME SADNESS OR FEELING NOTHING AT ALL)**

Depression is more than “a bad day” and different from the common experience of feeling sad for days or weeks following a loss. Depression is a medical condition that seriously affects a person's life and ability to function. Having some of these signs for a few weeks without getting better could mean someone has depression.



### **Signs:**

- feeling sad, hopeless, or empty most of the time
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- difficulty thinking clearly
- loss of pleasure in any activities
- slow speech and movement
- lack of energy for daily activities
- thinking a lot about death or suicide

## **Common Mental Health Problems**

► See page 422 for ideas to support your own mental health or to help others.



**misusing alcohol and drugs**

*Some people call depression “heaviness of heart” or “loss of spirit or soul.”*

### **Suicide**

Serious depression can lead to people harming themselves, sometimes resulting in severe harm or death (suicide). Almost everyone has thoughts of death or suicide once in a while. But if these thoughts come more and more often or get very strong, the person needs help right away. See page 431 for how to identify people who are most at risk for suicide and what to do.



► Other common names for anxiety are “nerves,” “nervous attacks,” and “heart distress.”

► Severe chest pain or difficulty breathing is an emergency. Try to help the person stay calm and get medical help.

## ANXIETY (FEELING NERVOUS OR WORRIED)

Everyone feels nervous or worried from time to time. When a specific situation causes these feelings, they usually go away afterwards. If someone stays worried, always fears the worst will happen, or has anxiety for no specific cause, they may need more support. Practices that promote feeling calm can help.

Other signs that can also happen with anxiety include:

- feeling tense, restless, or nervous
- difficulty thinking clearly
- sweating, headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains that get worse when upset

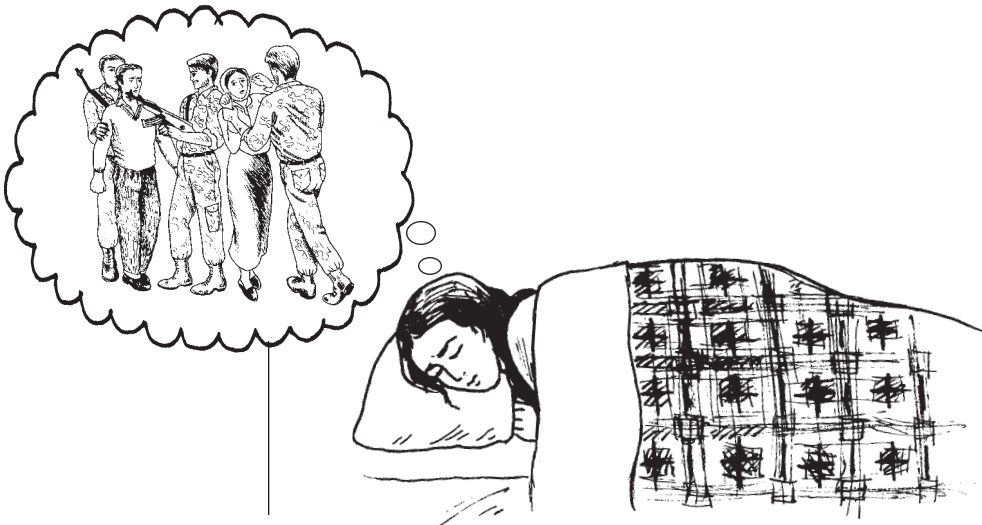
Panic attacks are a severe kind of anxiety. They happen suddenly and usually last a few minutes or up to half an hour. In addition to the signs above, a person may feel terror and their heart pounding and worry that they may lose consciousness (faint) or die. They may also have chest pain, difficulty breathing, and fear that something terrible is about to happen.



## REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

After a person has experienced trauma, they may have one or many of these common responses:

- Going over the trauma again and again in her mind. While she is awake, she may keep remembering the terrible things that happened. At night she may dream about them or be unable to fall asleep because she cannot stop thinking about them.



- Feeling numb or having fewer emotions than before.
- Avoiding people or places that remind her of the trauma.
- Becoming very watchful. If she is constantly looking out for danger, she may have difficulty relaxing and sleeping. She may overreact when startled.
- Feeling very angry or ashamed about what happened. If someone survived a trauma where others died or were seriously injured, they may feel guilty that others suffered more than they did.
- Feeling alone and distant from other people.
- Having outbursts of strange or violent behavior in which she is confused about where she is.



► People suffering from reactions to trauma may also feel anxious, depressed, or misuse alcohol or drugs.

Many of these signs are expected responses to trauma. For example, it makes sense to feel angry that something terrible happened or to be watchful if a situation is still dangerous. But if the signs are so severe that a person cannot carry out daily activities or if the signs start months after the trauma happened, the person may need help so these responses happen less often and less strongly, and affect their life less severely.

## PHYSICAL CHANGES AND ILLNESS CAUSED BY STRESS

When a person experiences stress, their body gets ready to react quickly and fight off or get away from the cause of the stress. Some of these body changes are:

- The heart beats faster.
- *Blood pressure* goes up.
- Breathing becomes faster.
- *Digestion* slows down.

If the stress is sudden and severe, a woman may feel these changes in her body. Once the stress is gone, her body returns to as it was before. But if the stress is less severe or happens slowly, she may not notice that the stress affects her body.

Stress that goes on for a long time can lead to the physical signs common in anxiety and depression, such as headache, intestinal problems, and lack of energy or pleasure in anything. Over time, stress can also cause physical illness, such as high blood pressure.

Emotional problems are often considered less important than physical ones. Especially for women, who are considered to be “more emotional” than men, these problems may be ignored until they begin to show up as physical signs of anxiety or depression. It is important to pay attention to both the physical and emotional causes of illness.

## Helping Yourself and Helping Others

► For some mental health problems, medicines may be helpful. Speak with a health worker who knows about medicines that treat mental health problems.



**W**hen worries or strong feelings make daily living difficult, it is important to get help. Although most communities lack mental health services, there are things a person can do on their own. It can also be helpful to form a “helping relationship” with another person or a group.

These suggestions are a few of the many ways a person can work toward better mental health. They will be most effective if you adapt them to your community’s culture and traditions.

### HELPING YOURSELF

Women do not often find time in their busy days to do something for themselves. Notice how you are feeling and what activities or situations make you feel better. Simple things like spending time alone, cooking, gardening, or shopping with a friend can all be helpful.

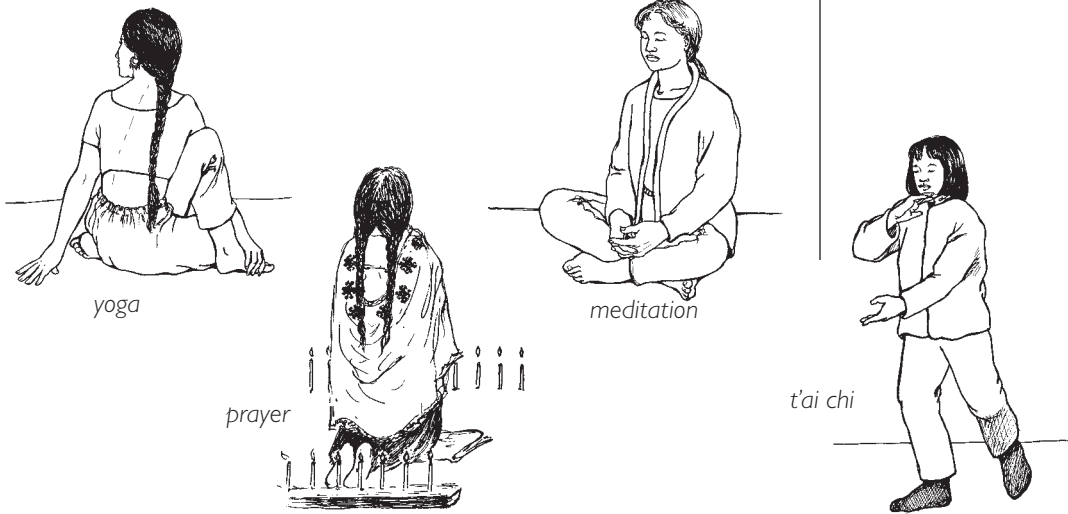


**Activities can let your feelings out.** If you are angry, do some hard physical work. Making up poems, songs, and stories can be helpful when you have trouble saying things to others. You can write down your thoughts or draw a picture of your feelings without using words—you do not have to show these to anyone else.

**Create pleasing surroundings.** Try to fix your living space so that it feels right to you. No matter how small it is, you will feel more order and control when it is arranged the way you like. Try to have as much light and fresh air as possible.

Try to have some beauty around you. This could mean putting some flowers in the room, playing music, or going where there is a nice view.

**Practice traditions that build inner strength.** Many communities have practices that help calm the body and mind as well as build inner strength. For example:



Practicing these traditions regularly can help a person feel better and manage the stress in their life.

## HELPING RELATIONSHIPS

It helps to have someone to talk to. In a helping relationship, 2 or more people make a commitment to get to know and understand each other. This can happen in any relationship— between friends, family members, or women who work together or already meet for another purpose. Or a new group may be formed among people who share a common problem. These are often called support groups.



► It is often easier to turn an existing group into a support group than to create a new one. Be careful when choosing helping relationships. Form relationships only with people who will respect your feelings and your privacy.

► No 2 people have exactly the same life experiences. There is always more to understand about another person.

### Building a helping relationship

Even when 2 people know each other well, helping relationships can develop slowly because people often hesitate to share their problems. It takes time to get over these worries and begin to trust others. Here are some ways to build trust between people or among members of a group:

- Be open to hearing everything another person says without judging it.
- Try to understand how the other person feels. If you have had a similar experience, think about how you felt but avoid seeing someone else's experience as exactly like your own. If you do not understand her, do not pretend that you do.
- Do not tell another person what to do. You can help her understand how the situation and pressures of her family, community, and work responsibilities affect her and her feelings, but she must make her own decisions.
- Never think of a woman as beyond help.

Respect the woman's privacy. Never tell others what she has told you unless it is necessary to protect her life. Always tell her if you plan to speak with someone else for her protection.

### Starting a support group

1. Find 2 or more women who want to start a group. Plan when and where to meet. It helps to find a quiet place where you can talk privately, maybe at a school in the evening, a health post, a cooperative or a place of worship.
2. At the first meeting, discuss what you hope to accomplish. Decide how the group will be led, what are the group rules you all agree to, and whether new members can join later.



3. Although the person who began the group will probably need to take the lead at the first meetings, she should not make decisions for the group. Her job is to make sure everyone has a chance to talk and to bring the discussion back to the main point if it wanders off. After the first few meetings, members may want to take turns leading the group. Having more than one leader can also help shy women lead.

**Meeting together with others can help people:**

- **get support.** Mental health problems often drain a woman's energy and make her discouraged. Meeting together can give a woman more energy which can help her cope with daily problems.



*Sometimes we would arrive at the meeting in a bad way. No one wanted to speak. But a quick hug or one person smiling at another would make others do the same and everyone would begin to feel better.*

- **recognize feelings.** Sometimes women hide their feelings (or do not even realize they have them) because they think the feelings are bad, dangerous, or shameful. Hearing others talk about feelings can help a woman notice her own.

*Some of us had been sexually abused in the past but we had never been able to share it with others. It was only in the group that we could talk about these terrible things.*



- **plan well.** Group members can help a woman think through a problem so she will not act on her first impulse.



*The group helped me to see others' points of view and to not get carried away by my feelings. This has helped me understand why other people react the way they do.*

- **understand underlying causes.** By talking together, women begin to realize that many of them suffer from the same kinds of problems. This helps them identify root causes of problems.

*I often felt bad about my family's poverty as if it was my fault. But the reasons we are poor are not our fault. Talking about this with others has helped me to stop blaming myself.*



- **propose solutions.** Solutions that are discussed in a group often improve and feel more possible to do than an idea one person has on their own



*There are things from our past that we have never discussed with our partners. In the group, we talked about how to deal better with these things. We get strength from each other.*

- **build power together.** Women acting together are more powerful than a woman acting alone.

*We all decided to have a ceremony and then accompany one of our members to get a death certificate for her partner and arrange the title for her land. Doing this by herself would have been very difficult.*



## EXERCISES FOR LEARNING HOW TO HELP

To help each other, members of a group need to understand what a helping relationship is and what makes it work. Try these exercises for:

► *These exercises are often done in groups but they can also be used by just 2 people.*

1. **Sharing experiences of support.** To become more aware of different ways to support others, the leader can ask members to tell a personal story in which they have received or given support. Examples might include accompanying someone, providing information, loaning money, or watching children. Then the leader asks questions like: What kind of support was it? How did it help? What are the similarities and differences among the stories? This discussion can help the group develop general ideas about what it means to support another person.

For example, tell a story of a woman whose husband drinks too much and beats her. The woman pretends nothing is wrong but speaks less and no longer participates in the community. Then the group can discuss: How could we as a group help her? How could she help herself?

► *Some women may feel more comfortable listening while sewing, weaving, or doing something else with their hands.*

2. **Practicing active listening.** In this exercise, the group divides into pairs. One partner talks about a topic for 5 to 10 minutes. The other partner listens without interrupting or saying anything except to encourage the speaker to say more. The listener



shows she is listening by her attitude and by the way her body shows she is paying attention. Then the partners switch roles.

When the partners are finished, they think about how well it worked. They ask each other questions like: Did you feel listened to? What made it difficult to listen? Then the leader begins a general discussion about ways to best show listening and concern. You can discuss how listening can also include talking, such as asking questions, sharing experiences, or saying “Thank you for sharing that” or “I understand.” When you do not understand, ask the person to explain more.

## EXERCISES TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH AND HEALING

Try some of these activities. Some help people feel better right away and others help prevent problems in the future.

1. **Share experiences and feelings in the group.** When stresses, fears, and problems weigh us down, we can also feel very alone. Just being able to talk about a problem can be helpful. After one person has told her story, people in the group can share similar experiences. When everyone has listened to these, the group can discuss what the stories have in common, whether the problem was partly caused by social conditions, and if so, what the group might do to change those conditions.
2. **Practice relaxing your body and mind.** These exercises are particularly helpful for relieving stress. In a quiet place where everyone can sit down, someone leads the group to follow these steps:
  - Close your eyes and imagine a safe, peaceful place where you would like to be. This might be on a mountain, by a lake or ocean, in a field, or some other place.
  - Keep thinking about this place as you breathe deeply in through your nose and then out through your mouth. Do this for about 20 minutes. If it helps, think of a positive thought, such as "I am at peace" or "I am safe."
3. **Learn to practice slow breathing.**
  - Breathe in through your nose and fill your lungs, counting as you breathe.
  - Press your lips together softly, and breathe out through a small space between your lips, as if to whistle or blow out a candle. Count while you breathe out, and make it last longer than the breathing in.

Doing this 10 minutes a day can lessen stress.





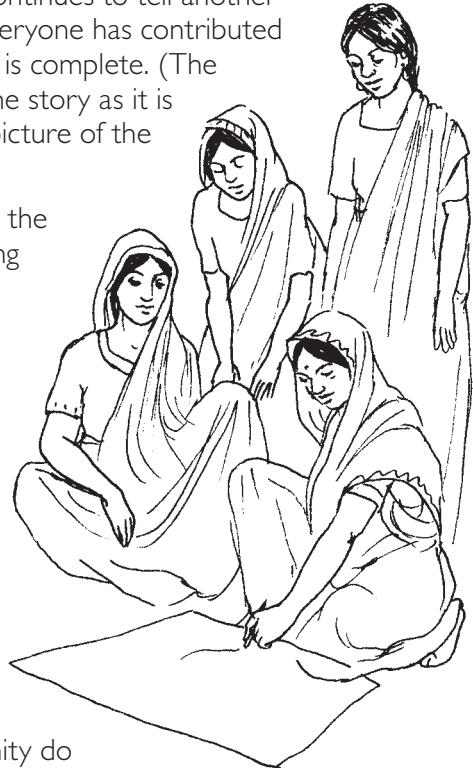
► *If you tell a story about a problem, try to also talk as a group about ways to overcome the problem.*

► *If a group has lived through a trauma and enough time has passed, they can analyze their own experiences rather than creating a story.*

4. **Create a story, drama, or painting.** The group can make up a story about a situation similar to those experienced by members of the group. The leader starts the story and then another member continues to tell another part—and so on until everyone has contributed something and the story is complete. (The group can also act out the story as it is told or draw or paint a picture of the story.)

Use questions to help the group discuss the meaning of the story:

- What feelings or experiences are most important in this story?
- Why did these feelings occur?
- How is the person handling these feelings?
- What can she try doing to feel better?
- What can the community do to help?



5. **Create a picture of your community.** This exercise works best after the group has been meeting together for a while. The leader first asks the group to draw a picture of their community. (It is OK to draw a simple picture to get things started.) Then the group adds to the picture, drawing places where things happen that support mental health and places that may harm it. For example, where girls go to school might be drawn as a source of strength and self-esteem. A place where women are harassed or attacked could be drawn as a source of stress.

As the group adds to the picture, it can begin to discuss ways to improve the community's role in mental health. The leader can ask questions like:

- How can we strengthen those parts of the community that support our mental health?
- What changes can be made?
- How can the group help bring about these changes?



In El Salvador, a group of women from an urban squatters' community decided to form a support group. They had lived through the civil war and now worked with victims of the war through their church. One member tells how the group began and how it has helped her:

“One day, many of us felt sad without knowing why. It wasn't that anything had just happened, but many of us felt the same way. Then one of us realized that it was the anniversary of the day everyone fled our community because of the war. That was when we decided to form this group. We needed to feel close, to understand the things we had experienced, and to cope with how we felt about losing our sons, daughters, husbands, and neighbors to the war—and for what?”

“In the group, we spoke of many experiences we had never been able to share with anyone else. This way, we slowly left behind the silence and the feelings of helplessness each of us had. We learned that fears become smaller when we can give them a name. We discovered that we all had the same fears: that others wouldn't understand, that we would not find an answer, and that sharing memories out loud would make them even more painful.

“We spoke, cried, and laughed, but this time we did it together. The group supported us and helped us to change and to see new directions for our lives. We were able to bring new energy and strength to our work. Now we help victims of the war—not just to rebuild their homes and health, but also to overcome their fears and hopelessness. This way they can create a new future for themselves and for their community.

“Even though we all lost so much to the war—and peace has not delivered on its promises—we feel as though we have given birth to something new. And like a new baby, this group brings new spirit into the world and gives us the strength to go on.”



► *Once a woman understands more about how and why she has certain reactions, the feelings usually have less control over her.*

*Massage can help someone relax and let go of painful feelings.*



## HELPING WOMEN WITH REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

- The most important way to support someone suffering from trauma is to help her learn to trust others again. Let her decide how fast your relationship develops. She needs to know you are willing to listen but that you will wait until she feels ready to talk. Doing everyday activities together may be best at first.
- It may help a woman to talk about her life before the trauma as well as what she is experiencing now. This may help her realize that although her life has changed a lot, in many ways she is the same person as before. If it seems right, encourage her to do some of the same.
- Some painful things may be too difficult for her to talk about or may be “buried” away where she cannot remember them. Exercises like drawing or painting or a physical activity like *massage* can help a person work through these painful feelings.
- If a woman has bad dreams about the trauma, she can put an object from her new life next to her as she sleeps. If she wakes suddenly, this will remind her she is in a different place now and safe.

- If reminders of the trauma make a woman react in fearful ways, help her make a plan to deal with those unexpected reminders. For example, a woman might tell herself, “His face is like the man who attacked me, but he is a different person and does not wish to hurt me.”
- If a person was tortured or raped, remind her that she was not responsible for what she said or did when that happened. Only those who tortured or raped her are to blame. Help her understand that one aim of torture is to make a person feel she can never feel whole again, but that this is not true.

## WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE WANTS TO KILL HERSELF

Anyone who has severe depression is at risk for suicide. You may notice changes, such as the person not taking care of herself, not acting like herself, or cutting off ties with people for no reason. A woman may not readily talk about thoughts of suicide but she will often admit them if asked. If she does, try to find out:

- Does she have a plan for how to kill herself?
- Does she have a way to carry out the plan? Is she planning to kill others as well (for example, her children)?
- Has she ever tried to harm or kill herself?
- Is her judgment affected by alcohol or drugs?
- Is she isolated from family or friends?
- Has she lost the desire to live?
- Is she going through a crisis or facing a desperate situation?

If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” she is more likely to attempt suicide than other people. To help, first try talking with her. Some people may begin to feel better simply by telling

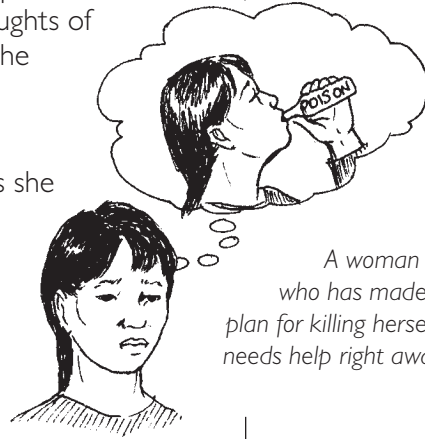


you about their problems. If so, or if she still feels bad but is more in control of her feelings than before, ask her to promise that she will not hurt herself without talking to you first.

If talking about her problems does not help or if she cannot promise to talk to you, then she needs to be watched closely. Always tell the person considering suicide that you plan to talk

with others to help protect her. Talk to her family and friends and encourage someone to be with her at all times. Ask them to remove dangerous objects from her surroundings.

If there are mental health services available, find out if someone can talk with her regularly. There may be a hotline number that people thinking about hurting themselves can use to speak or text with a trained counselor. Medicine for depression may also be helpful.



A woman who has made a plan for killing herself needs help right away.

► Asking someone if she wants to kill herself does not make her more likely to do so. It will help you know if her situation is urgent and allow her to talk about what she is feeling.

## Mental Illness (Psychosis)

➤ *Similar signs can be caused by illness, poisoning, medicines, drug abuse, or a head injury. A health worker can help determine this.*

➤ *Along with needing treatment, any person with a mental illness should be treated with kindness, respect, and dignity.*

**A** person with any of these signs may have a mental illness, especially if they happen often or interfere with daily life:

- She hears voices or sees or hears things that others do not see or hear (hallucinations).
- She begins to have ideas that are not true (delusions) which make her act in dangerous ways or affect her relationships—for example, she thinks that loved ones are trying to rob her.
- She no longer cares for herself—for example, she does not get dressed, clean herself, or eat.
- She acts strangely and there is no explanation for why she is acting so differently.

If you notice someone acting differently than usual, consider if community beliefs or traditions can explain it rather than mental illness. For example, if a woman says that she received advice in a dream, she may be drawing upon traditional sources of knowledge and guidance, not suffering from mental illness.

### Getting care for mental illness

Although in most places family members care for a person with a mental illness, it is best to also have advice or treatment from a trained mental health worker. In some situations, medicines are necessary but they should never be the only treatment.

Traditional healers can also play an important role in treating mental illness. If they come from the same community as the person with the problem, they may know and understand her. Some healers also have treatments or rituals that can help a woman overcome her problem.

Ask these questions before deciding on a treatment:

- What is the purpose of each step in the treatment? What is likely to happen as a result?
- If the person is not a danger to herself or others, can she get mental health care while living at home or living with others in her community?
- Will the family be involved in the treatment?
- Is the person providing treatment respected in the community?
- Do any of the treatments cause physical harm or shame?

If someone must be treated in a hospital, always ask to see it before leaving her there. Make sure that the hospital is clean, that patients are safe and can have visitors, and that they will get regular treatment with trained mental health workers. Patients should be free to move about unless they are a danger to themselves or others. Also, find out what must be done to have the person let out of the hospital later.



**Identify those who are at risk for mental health problems.**

Women are at risk if they have:

- had mental health problems in the past.
- lost family members or are separated from their families.
- witnessed violence or have a violent partner.
- little social support.

**Look for other signs that may indicate mental health problems.**

If you suspect that someone has a mental health problem, get to know her better. Listen to what other people are saying about how she is acting and ways she has changed. Since family situations, community values and stigma, and local emergencies can all affect mental health, think about how these may contribute to the problem.

**Build on a woman's strengths.** Every woman has developed ways to manage everyday problems. Help a woman identify successful ways she has dealt with problems in the past and how she might use these strengths in her present situation.

**Work with a woman's traditions and culture.**

Every community has traditional ways of dealing with mental health problems, such as prayer and ritual. Try to learn as much as you can about a woman's traditions and how they may be a source of strength for her. Anything that helps a woman recognize or give meaning to her experience can help her mental health.

**Remember that there are no quick solutions to mental health problems.**

Beware of anyone who promises this.

**Ask for help when you need it,** especially if you are a health worker. If you do not have experience working with a specific mental health challenge, try to talk to a mental health worker who does. Also, listening to other people's problems can make you feel burdened, especially if you listen to a lot of people with difficult problems. Watch yourself to see if you are feeling pressured, if you are losing interest in helping others, or if you get irritable or angry easily. These are signs that you are making other people's problems your own. Ask for help and try to get more rest and relaxation so you can work effectively.



## Ways to Improve Your Community's Mental Health

► *The most important part of any treatment is to make the woman feel supported and cared for. Try to involve people in her life who can help with this.*