

# Women's Mental Health



What it means to you.



*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,  
Office on Women's Health*



**womenshealth.gov**

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

# About this booklet

“Women’s mental health  
is critical to their overall  
health and to the health  
of our Nation.”

Wanda K. Jones, Dr.P.H.  
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health (Women’s Health)  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

*Good mental health is  
important to everyone.*

*And because it is so important,  
we need to talk about it more.*

*This booklet is about women’s  
mental health. It is based on the best  
science available. Researchers have a  
growing understanding about women’s  
unique mental health needs.*

*This booklet does not take the place of your  
doctor. And it does not diagnose mental  
illness. But it offers tips to help you protect  
your mental health. It also suggests who  
to turn to and where to go when you  
need help. And it could make it easier  
for you to talk about mental health.*

*Promoting better mental wellness  
for women is important to  
everyone.*



# Women's Mental Health

What it means to you.

## **Good mental health is an important part of a woman's overall health.**

Your mental health is as important as your physical health. In fact, new research is showing us how closely the two are connected. Taking care of your mental health can help you feel better physically. And taking care of your body is important for your mental health.

Good mental health helps you enjoy life and cope with problems. It offers a feeling of well-being and inner strength. Just as you take care of your body by eating right and exercising, you can do things to help protect your mental health.

Being able to recognize and talk honestly about your mental health is the first step.

"You need  
a balance of mental  
health along with spiritual,  
emotional, and physical health.  
It all works together."

Elaine, age 48, self-employed

## **Your mental health is important to others.**

Other people depend on you and your well-being. Your mental health

affects how you act with family and friends. It affects your work. Taking care of your mental health is important to the people around you.



## **Mental health is hard to talk about.**

Although it is easy to talk to our doctor, our family, or our friends when we are sick or hurt, we might prefer to keep mental health problems a secret. It isn't hard to see why. There is still shame associated with mental illness. We fear what we do not understand.

Family and culture can sometimes block the way when we need help for mental health problems. The way we were raised often shapes how we express feelings. We sometimes feel uncomfortable talking about problems outside our family – or

even within our family. In some families, talking about your feelings or seeking help is considered taboo. In many cultures, mental illness is something that you just don't discuss.

For these reasons, women can feel that if they discuss their mental health with a professional, they are being disloyal to their families or showing a sign of personal weakness. But taking care of your mental health is too important to ignore, even if it embarrasses others close to you.

*"There's a fear of putting our business in the street . . . of somehow revealing too much. Black women can perceive going to a therapist as something we don't do. There is a deep-seated feeling that going to seek professional help is a sign of weakness. But self-care is not weak or selfish. Take care of you, so you can take care of others."*

Latonya Slack, Executive Director,  
California Black Women's Health Project



### **Being able to "bounce back" is part of good mental health.**

No one chooses to be mentally ill. And no matter what you do to prevent it, sometimes mental illness just happens. There are causes you cannot control. A crisis or traumatic event can hurt your mental health. Some disorders also run in families.

The ability to bounce back from hard times or to deal with problems when they come is a big part of good mental health. It won't keep bad things from happening, but it helps us get past them when they do.

Here are some things that help you to bounce back:

- ◆ Having good friendships and family ties
- ◆ Doing activities you enjoy each day
- ◆ Feeling support from your faith, community, or loved ones
- ◆ Finding ways to reduce stress in your life
- ◆ Getting mental health help when you need it.

### **Mental health is important at every stage in your life.**

Your mental health needs change throughout your life. But being able to recognize and talk about mental health is important in every life stage. Here are helpful things to know about mental health at different times in your life.

*D i d   Y o u   K n o w ?*

Half of all mental illnesses begin in childhood, before age 14.

Three-fourths begin before the age of 24.



**Childhood** is an important time to build mental wellness. Half of all mental illnesses begin before age 14. Some are caused by child abuse or other kinds of trauma. Others are not. But all can lead to later problems like drug abuse, eating disorders, and trouble in school. If your daughter shows signs of problems, get help right away. Not only can it help her feel better, it can help avoid serious learning or social problems.

Young girls need to build good mental health habits. School is one place to learn them. Competitive

sports and games, clubs that help others, the arts, and faith can also help children develop skills for better mental health.

Girls need friends their own age, but they also need adults they can trust, respect, and look up to. If you are a parent, friend, or mentor of a young girl, talk with her every day. Be a good listener. Be involved. Show support by going to her games and performances. Find things you like doing together and talk while you do them. Be a good role model, and help her to pick good friends.



*The teenage years* are a time of rapid physical and personal growth. It is also a confusing time. During puberty, changes in levels of hormones can affect teens' moods. Teen girls may be at higher risk for depression, anxiety, or even suicide. Some teens develop eating disorders, too.

Some of the ways that girls and women are depicted in magazines, movies, and television shows can be confusing to teens. They can alter ideas for how our bodies should look and how to act. They can shape how young girls deal with problems.

### **Recognize the warnings and prevent teen suicide.**

Many teenage girls feel sad, stressed, angry, or confused from time to time. These are normal growing pains. But sometimes these feelings last a long time or become too big to bear. When teens feel stressed, terribly angry, violent, numb to the world, or so sad they think they will never feel better, they may consider taking their own life.

Girls are more likely than boys to attempt suicide, although boys are four times more likely to actually kill themselves. If anyone talks of suicide, it is very serious. Seek medical help immediately.

Who is at most risk? Teens who

- ◆ have tried to commit suicide before
- ◆ are depressed
- ◆ have a history of alcohol or drug abuse
- ◆ have a close family member who has attempted or committed suicide
- ◆ are already coping with depression or alcohol/drug abuse, and then also face a serious loss or stressful situation
- ◆ have easy access to a gun, particularly at home
- ◆ have recently read, seen, or heard about other teenagers who have committed suicide
- ◆ have been physically or sexually abused
- ◆ are in jail.



If you know anyone thinking about suicide, call **1-800-273-TALK** (1-800-273-8255). Or dial 911.

You can also call **1-866-SAFEYOUTH** (1-866-723-3968), or check in the phone book for the number of a suicide crisis center near you. Call immediately.

"Part of the reason I suffered from anorexia in the first place was that I was lonely and had too much free time on my hands. I thought that raising money for eating disorder awareness would give me something to do, something to care about, and something to think about besides food. It worked. It did help me get better. ... it makes me feel so good knowing that I can help other girls in the same position."

Anna, age 16

### **Know the signs of an eating disorder.**

- ◆ Dieting to maintain lower weight than is healthy
- ◆ Feelings of distress or extreme concern about body size, shape, or weight
- ◆ Eating tiny meals or skipping meals
- ◆ Exercising too much
- ◆ Binge eating (eating far too much at one time)
- ◆ Fasting
- ◆ Forcing oneself to vomit
- ◆ Misusing laxatives
- ◆ No longer having a period

Even if your daughter is not having problems, it is important to talk. It may seem awkward at times, but keep the conversations open. Tell her that you love her. Remind her that often things seem bad, but they can get better. Let her know that you are willing to help. List adults your daughter can turn to. Add phone numbers and e-mail addresses. It can be a parent or other relative, a friend's parent, a school nurse or counselor, a coach, a teacher, a faith leader, a trusted neighbor, or an employer.

Good habits and relationships help girls resist bad influences and trust their own judgment. They include playing sports, taking on challenges, helping others, and having people to look up to.



*Pregnancy* can be a time of great joy for women. However, it can also be a time when you feel sad, scared, or not in control of your life. You may worry about the extra costs and responsibilities that come with being a parent. There are many changes that happen during pregnancy – changes in eating habits, weight, and body shape. There are also changes in hormones that can affect your energy level and mood.

During the first year after giving birth, 60 to 80 percent of mothers feel “baby blues.”

They are sad without knowing why. About 1 in 10 mothers may experience more serious post-partum depression.

Don't keep these feelings to yourself. Get help if you feel depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed during pregnancy or after childbirth. Preventing or treating depression helps both you and your child, and may also lower your child's risk of developing depression or other health problems later.



*Menopause and midlife* bring changes to your body and feelings. Changing hormone levels can cause mood swings. Aging parents, children leaving home, or the serious illness of someone you love often add stress during this time.

Develop ways to cope with stress, find positive friendships, and fit in activities you enjoy. Take care of yourself and be alert for signs of mental health problems. Ask for help if you feel you need it.

*The senior years* are the best time of life for some women. For others, they can bring on depression and anxiety. These are not normal signs of getting older. They are signs that you may need help. Get treatment if you need it.

To promote good mental health, keep exercising your body and mind. Do activities you enjoy, strengthen friendships, hobbies, and family ties. Remember to exercise and eat lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts. Reading, playing cards, gardening, doing word or number puzzles, playing music, or going to concerts and shows help keep your mind alert.



## Taking time to relax and talk about problems can help promote good mental health.

Your work, family, and friends all affect your mental health. This can be good or bad. You juggle work and family. You take care of others. You try to keep balance and control in your life.

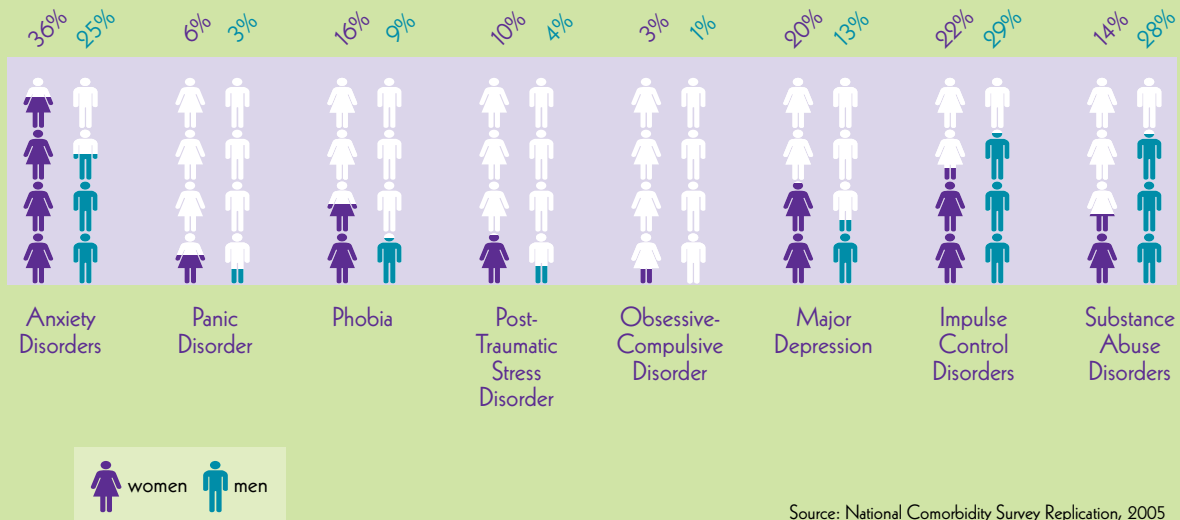
Here are some ideas for better mental health:

- ◆ **Family** can help your mental health by supporting your life choices. They can also encourage your interests.
- ◆ **Friends** are the people you can count on in a crisis. They make you laugh and are there just to listen.
- ◆ **Other relationships** include your faith leader, teacher, or counselor. You can confide in this person and talk with him or her about your concerns.
- ◆ **Pets** can keep you company and give you comfort.
- ◆ **Clubs** can get you out and talking to other people. A book club, service club, bridge club, or other social groups are all good ways to stay in touch.
- ◆ **Community events**, like celebrating your culture, volunteering in your neighborhood, or coaching youth sports can also be helpful.
- ◆ **Exercising** is good for your body and your mood. Sometimes finding others to join you—a walking buddy, exercise class, or dance group—can help keep you going.
- ◆ **Relaxing** is a good way to protect your mental health. Practice yoga, Tai Chi, or meditation. Take breaks to talk to workmates or friends. Take time out just for yourself—even just a few minutes a day.
- ◆ **Enjoying life** is very important. Take a bubble bath, visit your favorite park, play music, enjoy a crafts project, or have a pedicure. Make sure to fit fun things into your life.
- ◆ **Take time off** from work or family. Find ways to really relax and enjoy yourself.

"I think mental health is being able to order your life, your children, and all your responsibilities...most of the time."

Gerri, age 57, community health services employee

Women and men have different rates of mental disorders during their lives.



## Mental illness is more common than you think.

Nearly half of all Americans have symptoms of a mental illness at some point in life. So if it happens to you or someone close to you, you are not alone.

Even if you take care of your body and mind, there are no guarantees against mental illness. Even experts don't know the exact cause of most mental illness. Some forms can run in families. Others are caused by

changes in the brain. And we know that a crisis can trigger some mental illness.

You might think mental illness is something to be ashamed or afraid of. These feelings may cause you to not talk about it, especially outside your family. But it is important to know that counseling and treatment is always private. And talking with others about mental illness can help you feel better.

Did You Know?

Nearly half of all Americans (46%) suffer from a mental illness at some point in life.



### **Recognize signs that something is wrong.**

Mental illness can keep you from relating to your family and friends. It can also keep you from taking care of other people in your life. It can make it hard to do your work and even put your life at risk. Know signs of trouble and ask for help.

- ◆ You gain or lose a lot of weight.
- ◆ You lose your appetite or eat a lot more.
- ◆ You feel sad or cry a lot and it doesn't go away.
- ◆ You feel guilty for no reason, like you're no good, or you lose your confidence.
- ◆ Life seems meaningless or like nothing good is ever going to happen again. You have a bad attitude often, or it seems like you have no feelings.
- ◆ You don't feel like doing things you used to enjoy, and you want to be left alone most of the time.
- ◆ You do dangerous things for no good reason.
- ◆ You aren't as good at school or work as you used to be.
- ◆ It's hard to make up your mind. You forget a lot of things, and it's hard to pay attention.
- ◆ Little things make you mad, and you over-react.
- ◆ You start sleeping a lot more or you have trouble falling asleep at night. Or you wake up really early most mornings and can't get back to sleep.
- ◆ You feel restless or tired most of the time.
- ◆ You think about death or feel like you're dying. You think about killing yourself.
- ◆ You hear voices in your head.

Everyone has some of these feelings from time to time. But you should get help if they last for two weeks or more, or if they keep you from your relationships, your work, or your life.

### **Some mental illness is caused by trauma, violence, and abuse.**

Trauma is a terrible event in your life. It can be either physical or emotional, meaning it can happen to your body or your feelings.

Trauma increases your risk for mental disorder. It may come from

- ◆ Domestic violence
- ◆ Child abuse
- ◆ Incest
- ◆ Sexual abuse
- ◆ Emotional abuse
- ◆ Natural disasters
- ◆ War or terrorism
- ◆ Serious accidents.

### **Do you have a loved one who needs help?**

Make a list of reasons why you think so. A good first step may be to make an appointment with your family doctor. Go with your loved one to the appointment and help describe the problem.





Being the victim of trauma may lead to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, unhealthy eating, smoking, unsafe sex, hurting yourself, or thoughts of suicide.

If trauma, violence, or abuse has happened to you, get professional help so you can heal. Treatment and support can help you deal with the hurt and pain.

Trauma, violence, and abuse are more common than you may think. Nearly one-fourth of all women are raped or physically abused at some point in their lives. The effect of trauma on your mental health can appear right away. Sometimes the effects can appear long after the crisis is over. It may influence how you act with your friends and family. It may shape how you raise your children. It may also hurt your health and lead to depression, panic disorder, or post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

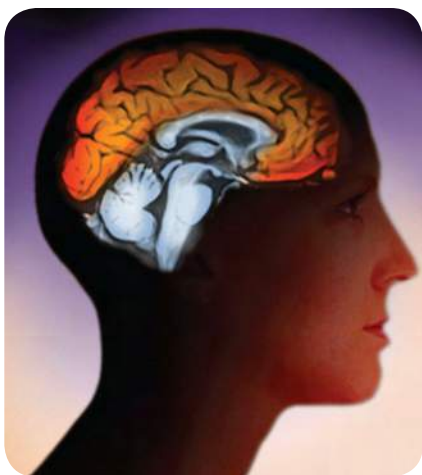
"I am living proof that healing is possible. I know there are many 'rafts in the river' to offer help and support to victims of trauma and abuse.

Relationships like friends, service providers, and recovery groups are out there."

Rene Anderson, Center on Women, Violence, and Trauma

Did You Know?

Nearly 1 out of every 4 women is raped or physically assaulted at some point during her life.



## It's not just "all in your head."

Depression is related to physical changes in the brain. Chemical messengers in the brain allow nerve cells to communicate with one another. A person with depression may have changing levels of these messengers, so nerve cells do not work as well as they could.

## Help for mental health problems is available.

If you feel out of control or feel like a mental health problem keeps you from enjoying life, ask for help.

People with mental illness often do not seek help when they need it. Or they may delay seeking treatment for years. They suffer while it could be avoided. Only 2 in every 5 people with a mental health problem seek a doctor's help when symptoms first appear. For some, it's because they feel ashamed. Others don't recognize that mental illness is a real, treatable illness. Still other people with mental health problems do not know where to get help or how.

Treatments can help you feel better and enjoy your life again. The best treatment depends on the type of problem you are facing. It may be one-on-one talk therapy. This is when you talk with a doctor or counselor alone. Or you may join group therapy, where you talk with other people like yourself along with a counselor. Your doctor may prescribe medicine to help control or reduce your symptoms. Or your doctor may suggest both medicine and talk therapy. For most people, this is better than either one alone.

## Choose help that works best for you.

When you go for help with your mental health, it's important to find a place you trust. You need to feel comfortable. If you think you are not improving, keep trying. If you still are not feeling better, see if there is another person, type of therapy, or place that can work better. You may feel more comfortable with a mental health professional who is a woman or with a support group for women. You may prefer a group that has the same age, race, religion, cultural background as you, or one that speaks your language.



Your family doctor can be a good first step. If you feel you need help, talk openly to your doctor about how you are feeling. You can also get help from any licensed mental health professional or the resources listed in the back of this booklet.

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Seeking treatment for mental illness is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength. And it is the first step on a path to recovery.

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Your local health clinic may have nurses, counselors, and social workers who are mental health experts. Even with visits as short as 15 minutes, they can offer treatments that can help you feel better.

### **"There is a good life for us, too."**

"Hispanic families have three very important values: Family, Respect, and Trust. Women are expected to put the 'familia' first, certainly before themselves. Speaking up, especially outside the home, breaks trust and respect. When I knew I needed mental health help I tried to turn to my family and follow their way (prayer, rosaries, candles, altar to the Saints). But I ended up in the hospital anyway. There I had to choose: either stay sick by not speaking about the truth or get well by talking to outsiders. My choice to get well, alienated me from family. After 14 years, some relatives still will not forgive me. But I've learned to break some chains and fill the void with my husband, children, and people I have met in recovery. It has taken a lot of work, but I have healed from many labels and am now on the happiest journey I have ever experienced.

That is why I share my story – to help other women like me know that there is a good life for us, too."

Gloria Grijalva-Gonzales,  
Substance Abuse Counselor  
San Joaquin County Health Care Services

Many other people and resources around you can give you strength. They include:

- ◆ Your family and friends
- ◆ Your church or faith leader
- ◆ A school guidance counselor
- ◆ Your employer's employee assistance program
- ◆ Support groups found through networks like your local YWCA.



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Women's mental health touches  
the lives of almost everyone,  
either directly or through the  
women we love.

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Remember...

- ◆ Your mental health is important. You will not have a healthy body if you don't also take care of your mind.
- ◆ You have to take care of yourself to take care of the people who depend on you, your strength, and your well-being.
- ◆ Promote your own mental health by keeping up with people and activities you enjoy. Find support when you need it.
- ◆ Remember that by caring for your mental health and getting help when you need it, you can enjoy life at any age.
- ◆ Don't be afraid or ashamed to ask for help. Everyone needs help at some point.



"Good mental health isn't just the absence of mental health problems. It's about having a sense of balance in your life — time alone and time with friends and family, work and play, rest and exercise. It's about taking care of yourself— body and mind."

Susan G. Kornstein, M.D., Executive  
Director, Institute for Women's Health,  
Virginia Commonwealth University

### Find help for drug and alcohol abuse.

Drug or alcohol abuse is a kind of mental illness. It is also often a sign of other mental health problems, like depression or having a history of trauma or abuse.

If you or someone you love has a drug or alcohol abuse problem, get help.

You can call the government's Toll-Free Referral Helpline at **1-800-662-HELP** (1-800-662-4357).

Or you can search online for a treatment facility near you at: **<http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/>**

Or seek help from your doctor, local clinic, employee assistance program, school counselor, or your faith leader.





This public document was prepared by the Office on Women's Health, Office of Public Health and Science in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make information about mental health available in plain language to improve health literacy on this topic.

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# Resource Guide *for Women's Mental Health*

## Here are some places you can go for help and information on women's mental health issues:

- ❖ Talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or other health care professional.
- ❖ See the Consumer's Guide to Mental Health Services developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration available at: **<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/cmh94-5001/Default.asp>**
- ❖ For free information about mental health, including publications, references, and referrals to local and national resources and organizations, contact SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center at 1-800-789-2647 (toll-free), 866-889-2647 (TDD), 240-221-4295 (fax), or **<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>**
- ❖ For information on substance abuse treatment call 1-800-662-4357 (toll free) Spanish-speaking operators available or visit **<http://csat.samhsa.gov/>**
- ❖ For information on the mental health of girls and women contact the National Women's Health Information Center at 1-800-994-9662 (toll free), 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or at **<http://www.womenshealth.gov/>**
- ❖ You can find out more about girls' mental health at: **<http://www.girlshealth.gov/mind/>**
- ❖ More information on mental health issues of girls and women is also available from the National Institute of Mental Health at: **<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/index.shtml>**
- ❖ The Office of Minority Health Resource Center has information in English and Spanish at 1-800-444-6472 (toll free) or **<http://www.omhrc.gov>**
- ❖ Free tools and materials offering practical ways to help adolescent girls and adult women achieve better physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellness are available at **<http://www.hrsa.gov/womenshealth>** or through the HRSA Information Center at 1-888-ASK-HRSA .



## HELPLINES

The numbers listed below can be dialed toll-free from anywhere in the United States. These organizations provide mental health information and referrals and, in some cases, crisis counseling.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

**1-800-826-3632**

8:30 a.m.–6:00 p.m. Monday–Friday (Central Time)

[www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

Spanish-speaking operators available

National Alliance on Mental Illness

**1-800-950-NAMI (6264)**

10:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m. Monday–Friday (Eastern Time)

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

Spanish-speaking operators available

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

**1-847-831-3438**

9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday–Friday (Central Time)

[www.anad.org](http://www.anad.org)

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

**1-802-296-6300**

[www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov)

National Center for Victims of Crime

**1-800-FYI-CALL (394-2255)**

**TTY 1-800-211-7996**

[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)

Multi-language service available

National Eating Disorders Association Information and Referral Program

**1-800-931-2237**

[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

**1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Spanish-speaking operators available

S.A.F.E. (Self Abuse Finally Ends) Alternatives

**1-800-DONT CUT (366-8288)**

[www.selfinjury.com](http://www.selfinjury.com)

This list includes private resources related to the mental health of women and girls. Inclusion of non-Federal organizations does not constitute an endorsement of any organization or product by the Federal government. All helpline numbers and web sites were verified in March 2008.



## HOW TO ORDER COPIES

To download or order copies of this booklet go to SAMHSA's Health Information Network (SHIN) at **<http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>**

To order single copies of this document or *Action Steps for Improving Women's Mental Health*, go to the website above or call toll free

**1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)**

## For more information

More information about this topic is available on the Office on Women's Health website at

**[www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)**