

Q: What is Lack of Insight?

A: Anosognosia is the single largest reason why individuals with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder do not take their medications. The term used by neurologist is “anosognosia,” which comes from the Greek word for disease (nosos) and knowledge (gnosis). It literally means “to not know a disease.” This impaired awareness of illness is caused by damage to specific parts of the brain, and affects approximately 50 percent of individuals with schizophrenia and 40 percent of individuals with bipolar disorder; this is especially true if the person also has delusions and/or hallucinations. Medications can improve awareness in some patients, consumers, and clients.

Q: What is Impaired Awareness of Illness?

A: People with impaired awareness of illness may not recognize that they are ill. Instead, they believe their delusions are real (e.g., the woman across the street is being paid by the CIA to spy on him) and that their hallucinations are real (e.g., the voices are instructions being sent by the President).

Q: Is Impaired Awareness of Illness the Same Thing as Denial of Illness?

A: No. Denial is a psychological coping mechanism that we all use, more or less. Impaired awareness of illness, on the other hand, has a biological basis and is caused by damage to the brain, especially the right brain hemisphere. The specific brain areas that appear to be most involved are the frontal lobe and part of the parietal lobe.

Q: Can a Person be Partially Aware of Their Illness?

A: Yes. Impaired awareness of illness is a relative, not an absolute problem. Some individuals may also fluctuate over time in their awareness, being more aware when they are in remission but losing the awareness when they relapse.

Q: Are There Ways to Improve a Person's Awareness of Their Illness?

A: Studies suggest that approximately one-third of individuals with schizophrenia improve in awareness of their illness when they take antipsychotic medication. Studies also suggest that a larger percentage of individuals with bipolar disorder improve on medication. Safe and effective treatments are available and may include talk therapy, medication or a combination of the two. Rigorous, published, peer-reviewed research clearly demonstrates that treatment works. The best treatments are highly effective; between 70 and 90% of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improves quality of life.

Q: Why is Impaired Awareness of Illness Important?

A: Impaired awareness of illness is the single biggest reason why individuals with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder do not take medication

- They do not believe they are sick, so why should they?
- Without medication, the person's symptoms become worse.
- This often makes them more vulnerable to being victimized and committing suicide.
- It also often leads to re-hospitalization, homelessness, being incarcerated in jail or prison, and commit violent acts against others because of the untreated symptoms.

It is difficult to understand how a person who is sick would not know it.

- Impaired awareness of illness is very difficult for other people to comprehend. A person's psychiatric symptoms seem so obvious that it's hard to believe the person is not aware he or she is ill. Oliver Sacks, in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, noted this problem. "It is not only difficult, it is impossible for patients with certain right-hemisphere syndromes to know their own problems... And it is singularly difficult, for even the most sensitive observer, to picture the inner state, the "situation" of such patients, for this is almost unimaginably remote for anything he himself has ever known.

How do I deal with Lack of Insight?

- Remember that lack of insight (anosognosia) is NOT something that your loved one is choosing; they have no control over the fact that they cannot grasp what is happening to them
- Meet your loved one where they are when it comes to understanding their mental health issues; they may need time to completely understand and grasp what is happening
- Your loved one may be more aware of their mental health issues when they are in treatment and less aware when they relapse
- Educate yourself and your loved one on the treatments available that can alleviate their symptoms (counseling or medication or both)
- Do not focus on trying to convince the person to change, rather focus on achieving realistic goals in their life.
- If the person resists treatment, and is of imminent threat to themselves or others, or is so disconnected from reality that they are unable to provide for their basic human needs or protection, they may need to be hospitalized against their will
- Utilize the L.E.A.P, Treatment Strategy (Amador, 2000)

General Treatment Strategies (Amador 2000)

- **Listen, Empathize, Agree, Partnership (L.E.A.P.)**
- **Listen** to what your loved one is saying without jumping to conclusions about what they want; try to get a clear understanding of what exactly it is they are trying to convey.
- **Empathize** with your loved one. This will allow them to feel that they can open up to you and that you are not working against them.
- **Agree** on things you observe with your loved one about what works or does not work for their treatment.
- **Partnership** Create a partnership with your loved one in order to work towards their recovery. This means allowing your loved one to be empowered by a partnership based on acceptance, non- judgment or stipulation. It means breaking down all misconceptions and biases, and working from a “strength based approach”, (e.g., looking at the strengths of your loved one and building upon them.) to come to a common ground that will facilitate a path to recovery.