

MENTAL & HEALTH SECURITY CLEARANCES





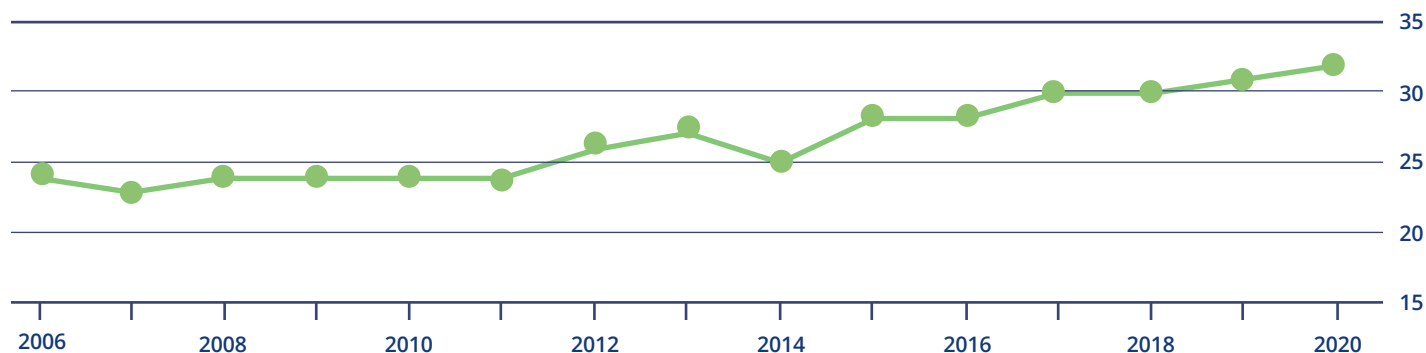
An estimated 21% of U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2020, according to the National Institute of Health (NIH). Nearly two-thirds of these people do not seek treatment; some because of the stigma that is associated with mental health treatment, according to separate reports by the surgeon general. Over the past two years, speculation has increased that mental health issues could be the next global pandemic, as individuals recover from the stress of two years of anxiety, fear, Zoom classrooms, and changing workplace demands.

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center released guidance in 2020 assuring cleared professionals that seeking mental health counseling related to COVID-19 stress would not result in a clearance denial or revocation. But mental health stigma is still alive and well, and many cleared professionals still face hurdles to get the mental health treatment they need – in their own heads and workplaces.

The reality is mental health (Guideline I, Psychological Conditions) is an adjudicative guideline, and untreated mental health issues, in particular, can affect an individual's ability to obtain or maintain security clearance eligibility. Unfortunately, many individuals worry unnecessarily and fail to seek the mental health treatment they need. Here are four common myths about mental health and security clearances, and what cleared professionals and employers need to know.

Negative experiences, anxiety, on the rise

The “negative experience index” is a measure of respondents’ experienced well-being on the day before the survey in terms of physical pain, worry, sadness, stress and depression.



Source: Gallup World Poll

MYTH #1

SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT COULD COST YOU YOUR SECURITY CLEARANCE

FACT

COUNSELING OR PROACTIVE MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT IS A MITIGATING FACTOR

The most recent version of the Standard Form 86—SF-86 clarifies that mental health treatment in and of itself is not a reason for security clearance denial. “Mental health treatment and counseling, in and of itself, is not a reason to revoke or deny eligibility for access to classified information or for holding a sensitive position, suitability or fitness to obtain or retain federal or contract employment, or eligibility for physical or logical access to federally controlled facilities or

information systems. Seeking or receiving mental health care for personal wellness and recovery may contribute favorably to decisions about your eligibility,” the form states.

Of the thousands of security clearance applications processed each year through the Department of Defense, only 11 applicants were denied clearances in 2021 by Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals (DOHA) administrative judges because of psychological conditions.

MYTH #2

YOU HAVE TO LIST ALL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING ON YOUR SF-86

FACT

THE SF-86 ASKS ABOUT SPECIFIC DISORDERS OR HOSPITALIZATIONS, NOT FAMILY OR ANXIETY-RELATED COUNSELING.

The SF-86 asks: “Have you EVER been diagnosed by a physician or other health professional (for example, a psychiatrist, psychologist, licensed clinical social worker, or nurse practitioner) with psychotic disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder, bipolar mood disorder, borderline personality disorder, or antisocial personality disorder?”

Even if you have been diagnosed with one of these disorders, the form emphasizes that a diagnosis in and of itself is not a reason for a

denial or revocation of a security clearance. The government will want to speak with your mental health professional to see if they believe your diagnoses would affect your ability to protect classified information.

This is where failing to be forthright could easily cost you your security clearance – it would be the dishonesty, not the disorder which would be a greater issue in the clearance process if you’re caught lying.

Mental Health: It’s Pandemic

21% of US adults experienced mental illness in 2020, according to the National Institute of Health.

41.5% of US adults exhibited symptoms of anxiety or depression in early 2021 according to the CDC.



WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU SAY YES?

A “yes” response to the “Mental and Emotional Health” question on the S-86 indicates that additional information beyond the required dates of treatment and identification of the health care provider is needed to make a final security clearance determination.

When applicants answer “yes” to this question they are directed to complete an “Authorization for the Release of Medical Information.” This form is on the last page of the SF-86 and authorizes a mental health practitioner to answer 3 questions:

- 1** Does the person under investigation have a condition that could impair his or her judgment, reliability or ability to properly safeguard classified national security information?
- 2** If so, describe the nature of the condition and the extent and duration of the impairment or treatment.
- 3** What is the prognosis?

If the answer to the first question is no, generally no other investigation into the mental health issue is required. If the answer to the question is yes, the security clearance applicant will generally need to provide the government with more information, including details on medication, treatment, and medical opinions. If those documents leave further questions, the applicant may be asked to undergo a psychiatric evaluation.

MYTH #3

IF YOU'VE BEEN HOSPITALIZED FOR A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO OBTAIN A SECURITY CLEARANCE.

FACT

HOSPITALIZATIONS AREN'T AN AUTOMATIC DISQUALIFIER.

The form asks about hospitalizations. But like all things on the form, just because it asks doesn't mean you will be disqualified from obtaining a security clearance. The hospitalizations questions is one of the 'ever' questions on the SF-86. Which means the government wants to know if you have ever been hospitalized for a mental health

condition. But like all 'ever' questions, passage of time can be a major mitigator. Consider using the additional comments section of the SF-86 in order to provide information about the reason for the hospitalization and steps you've taken to be proactive in caring for your mental health since.

MYTH #4

IF YOUR TRAUMA IS CLASSIFIED, YOU CAN'T TALK ABOUT IT.

FACT

There are a number of classified trauma counselors or chaplains available across the national security community. If you need to speak to someone about what you're going through, don't use the fact that your trauma is classified to keep you from seeking treatment.

Even if you find yourself away from a cleared mental health provider, there may be medical therapies like EMDR – Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing – which doesn't require discussing trauma that may be classified. Talk therapy is far from the only therapy option, so if 'talking' with someone about what you're going through doesn't appeal to you, consider alternative treatment options.



WHEN PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS DO RESULT IN CLEARANCE DENIAL

ClearanceJobs contributor William Henderson writes: Guideline I of the Adjudicative Guidelines lists 3 specific examples of potentially disqualifying conditions and 5 specific examples of mitigating conditions. Ultimately almost all cases where a final clearance is denied due to psychological conditions involve 1 of the 4 following situations:

- 1** The applicant has displayed dysfunctional or abnormal behavior, and the applicant refuses to seek treatment or refuses to undergo medical evaluation.
- 2** A qualified medical practitioner has determined that the applicant's condition could impair his or her judgment or reliability, and the applicant has failed to take medication or participate in other treatment as prescribed.

- 3** A qualified medical practitioner has determined that the applicant's condition could impair his or her judgment or reliability and the condition can not be adequately treated.

- 4** A qualified medical practitioner has determined that the applicant's condition could impair his or her judgment or reliability and there is a lack of persuasive evidence that the condition is under control and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Mental health matters. And while stigma is hard to reduce, the mantra across the government emphasizes that proactive mental health treatment is not disqualifying in the security clearance process. Don't let it be what stops you from seeking care.

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