October 4 through 10 is Mental Illness Awareness Week (MIAW) and time to get your flu shot. How are the two related? According to the National Institute for Health (NIH), one in four adults in the U.S. suffer from mental illness and about the same suffer from influenza. Both diseases can be devastating to the individual and to their families. While a simple flu shot can help prevent many cases of the flu, there is not such a simple approach to mental illness. That is one of the many reasons for the public to learn as much as possible about the symptoms, causes, treatments and therapies available for mental illnesses.

Mental health is the emotional, psychological and social well-being of an individual. It helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. Mental illnesses are serious disorders which can affect your thinking, mood and behavior. There are many causes of mental disorders. Genes and family history may play a role. Life experiences, such as stress, a history of abuse or biological factors can all be part of the cause. Mental disorders are common, but treatments are available.

Of those 55 and older, 20% suffer from mental illness. Yet, according to a report from the CDC, men aged 85 years or older have a suicide rate of 45.23 per 100,000, compared to an overall rate of 11.01 per 100,000 for all ages; the highest suicide rate of any age group.

Haven Behavioral Healthcare is a bridge to wellness in the education and treatment of those who suffer from mental illness. In recognition of MIAW, Haven’s goal is to bring awareness and provide information on the available treatments for mental illnesses. In addition, Haven seeks to help the public’s understanding of various types of mental illness including depression, substance abuse and bipolar disease. Social and emotional support for those suffering from any mental illness can greatly impact their recovery.

As part of MIAW, Thursday, October 8 is the 25th year of National Depression Screening Day® (NDSD). Clinical depression is a result of chemical changes in the brain and is more than a feeling of sadness that everyone experiences at some time. Genetic, environmental and psychological factors may all play a part in causing depression.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the following are some signs of depression:

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness or excessive sleeping
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment.

If you or someone you know is exhibiting behavior that is unusual and affects daily life, please seek help immediately. With proper diagnosis and treatment, mental illness is a very treatable disease. Mental Illnesses are almost as common as the flu. This October, be mindful of the warning signs of mental illness and seek the advice of a behavioral or medical professional if you have any concerns. And, don’t forget to get your flu shot!