

Mental illness treatments

Mental illness can be treated. When someone first starts to develop symptoms of mental illness, it is important to contact a doctor or a community mental health service for help.

The correct treatment can help a person's condition to improve or, in some cases, recover completely. Treatment in the community, rather than in a hospital, is considered better for a person's mental health. Psychological treatments are often the most helpful for people affected by anxiety disorders or depression, while medications are mainly helpful for people more seriously affected by mental illness.

Sometimes the symptoms can be so confusing for the person that they do not realise they are ill. In this case, family or friends can visit the doctor to discuss what can be done.

The initial assessment

A doctor will make a diagnosis based on the particular pattern of symptoms the person has. For instance, the following symptoms may indicate that the person has depression:

- Feeling 'down' for a prolonged period
- Not sleeping
- Being unable to concentrate.

The doctor will then decide on the best treatment for the symptoms and their underlying causes. Sometimes the diagnosis changes as symptoms change or as other information about the person and their illness becomes known. The most important thing is for the doctor to understand the symptoms so that the most helpful treatment can be selected.

The role of psychiatrists and general practitioners

People affected by mental illness may benefit from a range of treatments. Medical treatment (and/or referral to other health services) can be provided by:

- **A general practitioner (GP)** – your doctor can make an assessment and prepare a Mental Health Plan to help the person get treatment and support. This may include referral for psychological therapy from an appropriately qualified health professional, which may be largely covered by Medicare. GPs can also provide ongoing treatment for many people. Some undertake further training to specialise in this area. GPs also play a vital role in ensuring that the physical health of a person with a mental illness is not neglected.
- **A psychiatrist** – this is a medical doctor who specialises in the study and treatment of mental illness. Most people affected by mental illness will have contact with a psychiatrist at some stage of their illness. Those more seriously affected will have more regular contact.

Help is available through both public and private health care

As well as seeing a GP, services are available in both the private and the public health sectors:

- **Public health care** – this includes treatment in public hospitals and community mental health services. The advantages of this system are that it provides a range of services in the community and there is no direct charge.

- **Private health care** – it is possible to see a psychiatrist or psychologist who works in private practice. This usually involves paying a fee and then claiming a Medicare rebate, if the person is eligible. It is also possible to be an inpatient at a private clinic or hospital. However, unless the person has private health insurance, this will be expensive.

Community mental health services

It is thought to be better for a person's mental health to treat them in the community rather than in hospital. Mental health services are increasingly provided in the community by:

- **A case manager** – who will monitor the person's progress and make sure they have access to all the services they need (for example, housing and employment support). They will also help educate the person – and their family or other carers – about the illness and how to deal with it.
- **Crisis teams** – groups of mental health professionals who provide assessment and support for people who are seriously affected by mental illness. They can visit the person in their home and arrange for admission to hospital if needed.
- **Support teams** – that provide long-term support to the person in their home. Support teams try to reduce the number of admissions to hospital a person may need and help them to maintain a treatment plan and a reasonable quality of life.

Psychological treatment

Psychological treatments are based on the idea that some problems relating to mental illness occur because of the way people react to, think about and perceive things. They are particularly relevant to many people with anxiety disorders and depression. Psychological treatments can reduce the distress associated with symptoms and can even help reduce the symptoms themselves. These therapies may take several weeks or months to show benefits.

Different psychological therapies used in the treatment of mental illness include:

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** – examines how a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviour can get stuck in unhelpful patterns. The person and therapist work together to develop new ways of thinking and acting. Therapy usually includes tasks to perform outside the therapy sessions. CBT may be useful in the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders and psychotic disorders such as bipolar and schizophrenia.
- **Interpersonal psychotherapy** – examines how a person's relationships and interactions with others affect their own thoughts and behaviours. Difficult relationships may cause stress for a person with a mental illness and improving these relationships may improve a person's quality of life. This therapy may be useful in the treatment of depression.
- **Dialectical behaviour therapy** – is a treatment for people with borderline personality disorder (BPD). A key problem for people with BPD is handling emotions. This therapy helps people to better manage their emotions and responses.

Treatment with medication

Medications are mainly helpful for people who are more seriously affected by mental illness. Different types of medication treat different types of mental illness:

- **Antidepressant medications** – about 60 to 70 per cent of people with depression respond to initial antidepressant treatment. These medications are now also used (in combination with psychological therapies) to treat phobias, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders.
- **Antipsychotic medications** – are used to treat psychotic illnesses, for example schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Newer antipsychotic medications may have some side effects, but tend to have fewer of the effects that were associated with the older medications, for example stiffening and weakening of the muscles and muscle spasms.
- **Mood stabilising medications** – are helpful for people who have bipolar disorder (previously known as manic depression). These medications, such as lithium carbonate, can help reduce the recurrence of major depression and can help reduce the manic or 'high' episodes.

Other forms of treatment

Effective treatment involves more than medications. Treatment may also involve:

- **Community support** – including information, accommodation, help with finding suitable work, training and education, psychosocial rehabilitation and mutual support groups. Understanding and acceptance by the community is very important.
- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** – this treatment can be a highly effective treatment for severe depression and, sometimes, for other diagnoses when other treatments have not been effective. After the person is given a general anaesthetic and muscle relaxant, an electrical current is passed through their brain.
- **Hospitalisation** – this only occurs when a person is acutely ill and needs intensive treatment for a short time. It is considered better for a person's mental health to treat them in the community, in their familiar surroundings.
- **Involuntary treatment** – this can occur when the psychiatrist recommends someone needs treatment but the person doesn't agree. In general, people receive involuntary treatment to ensure their own safety or that of others.

Where to get help

- SANE Australia Tel.1800 18 SANE (or 1800 18 7263)
- Your doctor – for information and referral
- Community mental health service

Things to remember

- A doctor (GP) or a community mental health service is the first port of call when a person becomes unwell with mental illness.
- It is thought to be better for a person's mental health to treat them in the community rather than in hospital.
- Psychological treatments are often the most helpful for people affected by anxiety disorders or depression.
- Medications are mainly helpful for people more seriously affected by mental illness.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SANE Australia

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.