

Mental illness

Mental illness is a general term for a group of illnesses. A mental illness can be mild or severe, temporary or prolonged. Most mental illnesses can be treated.

Mental illness can come and go throughout a person's life. Some people experience their illness only once and fully recover. For others, it is prolonged and recurs over time. Mental illness can make it difficult for someone to cope with work, relationships and other aspects of their life.

The symptoms of mental illness

A person with a mental illness can experience problems with their thinking, emotions and/or behaviour. These changes may happen quickly, or they may be gradual and subtle. It may take time to understand and identify what is happening.

Psychotic symptoms

These symptoms can include:

- Thoughts and feelings that are out of the ordinary or difficult to understand, such as thought of being persecuted or under surveillance for which there is no proof
- Experiencing sensations (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting something when there is nothing there that others can identify)
- Odd behaviour.

Schizophrenia is a psychotic illness.

Mood symptoms

Some of the symptoms of a changed mood may include:

- Persistent and pervasive feelings of sadness, elation, anxiety, fear or irritability
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Loss of interest in things that were previously enjoyable
- Periods of increased or decreased activity, where things may be started and not finished
- Difficulty thinking and concentrating
- Excessive worries
- Changes in use of alcohol and other drugs.

Exact causes are unknown

Many mental illnesses are thought to have a biological cause. What triggers a mental illness is not known.

The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness.

Compassion and understanding helps recovery

Many people may not know how to respond to a person who is mentally ill. People may react with embarrassment, rejection and abuse if they do not understand unusual behaviour. Such reactions can be a big hurdle for people with a mental illness who are trying to get well.

A person with a mental illness often faces isolation and discrimination from family, friends, employers and neighbours. These attitudes can make people hide their illness and feel ashamed. Family, friends, colleagues and other people can make a huge difference to a person's recovery with understanding and compassion.

Type of help available

Different mental illnesses need different treatments. Most people benefit from counselling, medication or both. People may also need help with other aspects of their life, such as work or recreation, to assist with recovery.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local community mental health service
- SANE Helpline Tel. 1800 187 263
- AREFEMI (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill) Tel. (03) 9889 1777
- Mental Health Foundation Australia (Victoria) Tel. (03) 9427 0406

Things to remember

- One in five adults will experience a mental illness at least once in their lives.
- Help is available.
- Compassion and understanding are essential to assist a person in their recovery.

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

Department of Health - Victoria's Mental Health Services

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