Mental illness treatments
A doctor or a community health service is the first place to visit when a person becomes unwell with mental illness. Sometimes, the symptoms can be so confusing for the person that they do not realise they are ill. Psychological treatments are often the most helpful for people affected by anxiety disorders or depression. Medications are mainly helpful for people more severely affected by mental illness.

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 help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms. Psychological treatments are often the most helpful for people affected by anxiety disorders or depression, while medications are mainly helpful for people more severely 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 seek support and advice about how they can best help the person.

Initial assessment of mental illness

A doctor will make a diagnosis based on the person’s particular pattern of symptoms. For example, symptoms that may indicate the person has depression include:

- feeling ‘down’ for a prolonged period
- not sleeping
- being unable to concentrate.

The doctor will then talk to the person about 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 doctor will talk to the person about how the treatment will work and explain any side effects. The person can ask the doctor questions about the proposed treatment.

Psychiatrists and general practitioners

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

- A local doctor (general practitioner or GP) – 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. A doctor can also provide ongoing treatment for many people. Some doctors undertake further training to specialise in this area. Doctors also play an important role in making sure that the physical health of a person with a mental illness is not neglected.
- A psychiatrist – 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 for people with mental illness

As well as seeing a doctor, you can access services in both the private and the public health sectors, including:

- Public healthcare – 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 healthcare – 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

Treatment may be provided either in the community or at an inpatient service. Mental health services are increasingly provided in the community by:
• A case manager – will support the person’s recovery and help them to access all the services they need (for example, housing and employment support). They will also help educate the person – and their family or carers – about the illness and how to manage it.
• Acute community intervention 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.
• Community support teams – provide longer-term support to the person in their home. Support teams try to reduce the number of admissions to hospital a person may need, and can help them to maintain a treatment plan and improve their quality of life.

Psychological treatments for people with mental illness

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 disorder 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 for people with mental illness

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

• 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, such as 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 for mental illness

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

• 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 treatment (ECT) – this treatment can be highly effective 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 – 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 familiar surroundings.
• involuntary treatment – can occur when the psychiatrist recommends someone needs treatment, but the person doesn’t agree. People only receive compulsory treatment to prevent serious deterioration in their mental or physical health, or to prevent serious harm to the person or another person.

Where to get help

• SANE Australia Helpline Tel.1800 18 SANE (7263)
• Your doctor – for information and referral
• Community mental health service
• beyondblue Support Service Tel. 1300 22 4636

Things to remember

• A doctor or a community health service is the first place to visit when a person becomes unwell with mental illness.
• Sometimes, the symptoms can be so confusing for the person that they do not realise they are ill.
• Psychological treatments are often the most helpful for people affected by anxiety disorders or depression.
• Medications are mainly helpful for people more severely affected by mental illness.

References

• Mental health – information for families and carers, Victoria’s Mental Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government. More information here.
• Psychological treatments, SANE Australia. More information here.
• Treatments for mental illness, SANE Australia. More information here.

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More information

Mental illness

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as 'Active Tab'

- Mental illness explained
- Types of mental illness
- Eating disorders
- Support, services and treatment
- Living with mental illness
- Suicide prevention

Mental illness explained

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...
- Forensic mental health
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending...
- Let's talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...
- Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we're witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...
- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
  If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you...
- Mental illness explained
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness...
- Mental illness treatments
  The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person's condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms...

Types of mental illness

- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people...
- Bipolar disorder
  Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person’s perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings...
- Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)
  People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look...
- Borderline personality disorder
  People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication...
- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support...
- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...
- Heart disease and mental health
Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

- Munchausen syndrome
  Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy...

- Obsessive compulsive disorder
  Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life...

- Panic attack
  Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling...

- Paranoia
  Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you' or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others...

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
  People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event...

- Psychosis
  In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused...

- Schizoaffective disorder
  Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia...

- Schizophrenia
  People with schizophrenia do not have 'split personalities' and they are not intellectually disabled...

- Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem...

Eating disorders

- Anorexia nervosa
  A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages...

- Binge eating disorder
  You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment...

- Bulimia nervosa
  Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery...

- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups...

- Eating disorders and adolescents
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life...

- Eating disorders - support for families
  You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder...

- Other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED)
  OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders...

Support, services and treatment

- Antipsychotic medications
  Antipsychotic medications don't cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms...

- Cognitive behaviour therapy
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving...

- Counsellors
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor...
• Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people's daily lives.

• Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)
  ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness.

• Mental health care plans
  A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team.

• Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we're witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

• Mental health problems - early care helps
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early.

• Mental health services - case managers
  A case manager looks after your interests while you are a client of public (government) mental health services.

• Psychoanalysis
  Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.

Living with mental illness

• 10 tips for living with depression
  Try to do some activity every day ... 10 tips for living with depression.

• 10 tips to improve your mental fitness
  The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical.

• About mental health services in Victoria (video)
  Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages.

• Alzheimer's disease - Early signs (video)
  Family and friends of people with Alzheimer's disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs.

• Eating disorders and adolescents
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• Eating disorders - support for families
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• Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

• Mental illness and violence
  People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community.

• Mental illness - family and friends
  You can do a lot to help your friend or relative with a mental illness, but you need to look after yourself too.

• Strong relationships, strong health

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Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

Suicide prevention

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...

- Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- Suicide
  In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged between 15 and 44. We can all play a role in preventing suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out...

- Suicide and mental illness
  A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness...

- Suicide - family and friends
  The grief felt by family and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide...

- Youth suicide – the warning signs
  All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide...

Related Information

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

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Home

Related information on other websites

- Victoria’s Mental Health Services – Victorian Government.

Support Groups

- Mind - Supporting mental health recovery

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Last updated: June 2015

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