



well ways helping families & friends find better ways

Frequently asked questions about mental illness

What is mental illness?

Mental illness refers to a group of disorders that affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts. Mental illnesses include depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety and personality disorders. Some mental illnesses involve the experience of psychosis (where a person loses touch with reality) and some do not.

Who is susceptible to mental illness?

Mental illness is more common than you may think. Mental illness directly affects one in five Australians at some stage in their lives, varying from mild or temporary to severe or prolonged. It is even more common among young adults, affecting 25 percent of this age group. It is felt across all sections of society. It can affect relationships, the ability to work, and participation in, and enjoyment of, life.

What causes mental illness?

There is some evidence that mental illness is caused by a combination of biological factors that create a vulnerability. Genetics play a part, but people can develop a mental illness with no family history at all. We know that chemical changes occur that affect functioning of the brain (both dopamine and serotonin are involved). People who are vulnerable to mental illness may experience symptoms in response to stress, social change or drugs.

Is recovery possible?

Yes. Advancements in medication are continually improving the outlook for people with a mental illness. Along with psychological and social supports, a majority can live active and fulfilled lives.

How will I know if someone is developing a mental illness?

Early warning signs differ from person to person, but some common signs are when a person's behaviour changes (either suddenly or gradually) and he or she becomes unusually suspicious, anxious, depressed, irritable or angry. The person may experience mood swings, sleeplessness, loss of motivation and energy, changes in eating patterns, and memory loss. Family and friends will notice changes in a person's behaviour, often with a disruption to a person's work or study and to a person's energy levels and sociability. These symptoms can sometimes be a reaction to life events or changes, especially for people in adolescence, but if in doubt, seek advice from a health service. Early intervention is better for all concerned.

If I develop psychotic symptoms, do I have a mental illness?

Psychosis is when a person loses touch with reality and has confused thoughts, perception, emotions and behaviour. Symptoms may include disturbing delusions and hallucinations. Psychotic symptoms can occur in an isolated episode

or as part of an ongoing diagnosed illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, psychosis or schizoaffective disorder. Three in every 100 people will experience a psychotic episode. Many recover fully. Like any other illness, psychosis can happen to anyone. Some experiences of psychosis are isolated episodes, especially substance-induced psychosis and brief reactive psychosis.

Substance-induced psychosis

Sometimes a first episode can be triggered by the use of drugs, including heroin, cocaine, alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines (speed) and benzodiazepines. Drug-induced psychosis will subside once the drugs or alcohol are out of the person's system.

What are the more common mental illnesses?

Schizophrenia

A cognitive disorder where symptoms may include delusions, hallucinations, disorganised thought, speech or behaviour, and a flattening in emotions.

Bipolar mood disorder

People with bipolar mood disorder experience recurrent episodes of depressed and elated moods. Both can be mild to severe. The term 'mania' is used to describe the most severe state of extreme elation and overactivity.

Schizoaffective disorder

This is an illness that displays some of the psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia along with the mood extremes associated with bipolar disorder.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders represent a condition in which worry, anxiety or fear are prominent symptoms. Disorders include obsessive compulsive disorder, panic attacks and phobias. Typically, a person's anxiety levels are so high that day to day functioning becomes difficult.

Depression

Clinical depression involves a persistent lowering of mood. This plays out in a variety of symptoms that include feeling extremely sad or tearful, sleeplessness, feeling guilty and worthless, loss of energy and motivation, loss of pleasure, and impaired thinking and concentration. Everyday functioning can become extremely difficult.

Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifa.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
www.mifellowship.org

Mental Health Services Website (Vic)
www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)
www.nami.org

Mental Health Council of Australia
www.mhca.com.au

SANE Australia
www.sane.org

Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowships of Australia fact sheets

Understanding psychosis

Understanding schizophrenia

Understanding bipolar disorder

Understanding schizoaffective disorder

Understanding anxiety

Understanding depression

Understanding borderline
personality disorder

Understanding dual diagnosis
(mental illness and substance use)



Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
08 8221 5072 www.mifa.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc
07 4725 3664 www.mifnq.org.au
Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc
07 3358 4424 www.sfq.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of
Sth Australia Inc
08 8221 5160 www.mifsa.org
Mental Health Carers NT
08 8948 1051
www.mentalhealthcarersnt.org

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
03 8486 4200 www.mifellowship.org
Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc
02 9879 2600 www.sfnsw.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of the ACT Inc
02 6205 2021 www.mifact.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc
08 9228 0200 www.mifwa.org.au
ARAFMI (Tas) Inc
Launceston 03 6331 4486
Moonah 03 6228 7448
www.arafmitas.org.au