

# What is mental illness?



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About one in five Australians will experience a mental illness, and most of us will experience a mental health problem at some time in our lives.

Mental illness is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses, in the same way that heart disease refers to a group of illnesses and disorders affecting the heart.

A **mental illness** is a health problem that significantly affects how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people. It is diagnosed according to standardised criteria. The term **mental disorder** is also used to refer to these health problems.

A **mental health problem** also interferes with how a person thinks, feels, and behaves, but to a lesser extent than a mental illness.

Mental health problems are more common and include the mental ill health that can be experienced temporarily as a reaction to the stresses of life.

Mental health problems are less severe than mental illnesses, but may develop into a mental illness if they are not effectively dealt with.

Mental illnesses cause a great deal of suffering to those experiencing them, as well as their families and friends. Furthermore, these problems appear to be increasing. According to the World Health Organization, depression will be one of the biggest health problems worldwide by the year 2020.

## Types of mental illness

Mental illnesses are of different types and degrees of severity. Some of the major types are depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar mood disorder, personality disorders, and eating disorders.

The most common mental illnesses are anxiety and depressive disorders. While everyone experiences strong feelings of tension, fear, or sadness at times, a mental illness is present when these feelings become so disturbing and overwhelming that people have great difficulty coping with day-to-day activities, such as work, enjoying leisure time, and maintaining relationships.

At their most extreme, people with a depressive disorder may not be able to get out of bed or care for themselves physically. People with certain types of anxiety disorder may not be able to leave the house, or may have compulsive rituals to help them alleviate their fears.

Less common are mental illnesses that may involve psychosis. These include schizophrenia and bipolar mood disorder. People experiencing an acute episode of psychosis lose touch with reality and perceive their world differently from normal. Their ability to make sense of thoughts, feelings, and the world around them is seriously affected.

A psychotic episode may involve delusions, such as false beliefs of persecution, guilt, or grandeur. It may involve hallucinations, where the person sees, hears, smells, or tastes things that are not there.

Psychotic episodes can be threatening and confusing to other people. Such behaviour is difficult to understand for people who are not familiar with it.

## **Treatment of mental illness**

Most mental illnesses can be effectively treated. Recognising the early signs and symptoms of mental illness and accessing effective treatment early is important. The earlier treatment starts, the better the outcome.

Episodes of mental illness can come and go during different periods in people's lives. Some people experience only one episode of illness and fully recover. For others, it recurs throughout their lives.

Effective treatments can include

medication, cognitive and behavioural psychological therapies, psycho-social support, psychiatric disability rehabilitation, avoidance of risk factors such as harmful alcohol and other drug use, and learning self-management skills.

It is rarely possible for someone with a mental illness to make the symptoms go away just by strength of will. To suggest this is not helpful in any way.

People with a mental illness need the same understanding and support given to people with a physical illness. A mental illness is no different-it is not an illness for which anyone should be blamed.

People with mental illness may be at risk of harmful alcohol and other drug use. This makes treatment more complex, so that effectively managing alcohol and other drug use is important.

Risk of suicide is heightened for people with some mental illnesses, particularly soon after diagnosis or release from hospital.

## **Myths, misunderstandings and facts about mental illness**

Myths, misunderstandings, and negative stereotypes and attitudes surround mental illness. These result in stigma, discrimination, and isolation of people with mental illness, as well as their families and carers.

Common questions about mental illness are:

**Are mental illnesses a form of intellectual disability or brain damage?**

**No.** They are illnesses just like any other, such as heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. Yet the traditions of sympathy, support, and flowers given to people with physical illnesses are often denied to those with a mental illness.

**Are mental illnesses incurable and lifelong?**

**No.** When treated appropriately and early, many people recover fully and have no further episodes of illness.

For others, mental illness may recur throughout their lives and require ongoing treatment. This is the same as many physical illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. Like these other long-term health conditions, mental illness can be managed so that individuals live life to the fullest.

Although some people become disabled as a result of ongoing mental illness, many who experience even very major episodes of illness live full and productive lives.

**Are people born with a mental illness?**

**No.** A vulnerability to some mental illnesses, such as bipolar mood disorder, can run in families. But other people develop mental illness with no family

history.

Many factors contribute to the onset of a mental illness. These include stress, bereavement, relationship breakdown, physical and sexual abuse, unemployment, social isolation, and major physical illness or disability. Our understanding of the causes of mental illness is growing.

**Can anyone develop a mental illness?**

**Yes.** In fact, as many as one in five Australians may develop a mental illness at some stage in their lives. Everyone is vulnerable to mental health problems.

Many people feel more comfortable with the notion of having 'a nervous breakdown' rather than a mental illness. However, it is important to talk openly about mental illness, as this reduces the stigma and helps people to seek early treatment.

**Are people with mental illness usually dangerous?**

**No.** This false perception underlies some of the most damaging stereotypes. People with a mental illness are seldom dangerous. Even people with the most severe mental illness are rarely dangerous when receiving appropriate treatment and support.

**Should people with a mental illness be isolated from the community?**

**No.** Most people with a mental illness recover quickly and do not even need

hospital care. Others have short admissions to hospital for treatment. Improvements in treatment over recent decades mean that most people live in their communities, and there is no need for the confinement and isolation that was commonly used in the past.

A very small number of people with mental illness need hospital care, sometimes against their will. Improvements in treatment are making this less and less common, and fewer than one in a 1000 people are treated this way.

### **Is stigma one of the biggest problems for people with mental illness?**

**Yes.** One of the biggest obstacles for people recovering from mental illness is confronting the negative attitudes of other people. These often mean that people with mental illness face isolation and discrimination just for having an illness.

Positive and hopeful attitudes of family, friends, service providers, employers, and other members of the community toward people with mental illness are critical to ensuring quality of life for people with mental illness and supporting recovery.

## **What can be done about the stigma of mental illness?**

- Think about mental illnesses like any other illness or health condition and bring them into the open.
- Talk about mental illness openly with everyone you meet - it is surprising how many people are affected by mental illness, particularly the highly prevalent disorders of depression and anxiety.
- Educate the community to overcome negative stereotypes based on misconceptions.
- Promote mental health and healthy attitudes through childhood and adult life.
- Support the development of resilience: learn ways to deal with stress in relationships, situations, and events.
- Assist friends and family with a mental illness to obtain care and treatment as early as possible.
- Ensure high quality support and treatment services are provided to people with mental illness to promote recovery.
- Actively support the families and carers of people who have mental illness, who also experience the confusion, distress, and stigma that can accompany mental illness.
- Address discrimination in every area of life, including employment, education, and the provision of goods, services, and facilities.
- Encourage research into mental illness to assist understanding of how these illnesses affect people and can be prevented and/or effectively treated.

## Where to go for help

- Your general practitioner.
- Your community health centre.
- Your community mental health centre.

For information on services, check the Community Help and Welfare Services and 24-hour emergency numbers in your local telephone directory.

For immediate counselling assistance, contact Lifeline on **13 11 14**. Lifeline can also supply you with contacts, further information and help.

Other useful sources of information about mental illness are:

SANE Australia [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia  
[www.mifa.org.au](http://www.mifa.org.au)

The public area of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists  
[www.ranzcp.org](http://www.ranzcp.org)

Auseinet [www.auseinet.com](http://www.auseinet.com)

Australian Government's HealthInsite  
[www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

Insert local contact details here

## About this brochure

This is the first in a series of brochures on mental illness funded by the Australian Government under the National Mental Health Strategy. Information about specific mental illnesses can be found in the other brochures, which include:

- *What is an anxiety disorder?*
- *What is bipolar mood disorder?*
- *What is a depressive disorder?*
- *What is an eating disorder?*
- *What is a personality disorder?*
- *What is schizophrenia?*

Free copies of all brochures are available from Mental Health and Workforce Division of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing:

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