



mental health
association
nsw inc

Mental illness: Frequently asked questions

Mental illness is a term used to describe a wide range of disorders that are considered to be related to the mind or brain in some way. It is easier to understand the term mental illness when you bear in mind our basic biology. In some ways it is an artificial concept to separate the brain from the body, just as it would be to suggest that the liver or any other organ is separate from the body. The brain is part of the central nervous system which extends through our bodies and includes the spinal cord. Thus, the brain plays a role with everything we do from walking, sleeping, worrying, hearing and crying to falling in love. If there is some change in the structure or chemistry of the brain, then our feelings, thoughts and behaviour are affected.

When an illness has an impact on our thoughts, feelings or behaviour it is considered to be a 'mental' illness. Looking at mental illness this way sheds light on how disorders as different as schizophrenia, anorexia and attention deficit disorder come under the term 'mental illness.' Some disorders begin with a problem in the nervous system while others result from external stress that in some way has an impact on the nervous system. Mental illness is NOT a character fault, weakness or something inherently 'wrong' with a person. It is an illness like any other and a person has a right to expect appropriate medical and other treatment, as well as care and support through their illness.

Has This Been 'Passed Down' From My Parents or Grandparents?

Some mental illnesses may be wholly or partly inherited. This means that something may be passed on within the genes and therefore form part of a person's genetic make up. However, a person may inherit a gene but not experience the symptoms, or they may not inherit that particular gene, even though a parent or grandparent did carry it.

Some mental illnesses also seem to be caused by biological changes that are not genetic (and thus cannot be inherited), whilst others seem to be triggered by difficult life circumstances and stress. Overall mental illness seems to be caused by a combination of factors that are unique to each person.

Can Drugs Or Stress Trigger a Mental Illness?

Drugs and stress can create a set of circumstances that make a person vulnerable to mental illness. Trauma, abuse and other stressful life experiences are thought to contribute to, or trigger, certain mental illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Mental illness can also begin through habitual thought patterns that have been learnt, such as focusing on the negative or fearful in any situation.

Environmental factors such as excessive stress and substance abuse can play a part by altering the brain's chemistry, and an individual's personality can also influence the way they react to life events.

Each of us has a different combination of personality traits, coping skills, family history, education, and perception of our selves and our environment. It is a complex interplay between each individual, their perceptions of the world, and responses to it that influences how we cope with the things that happen around us and within us.

How Will Having a Mental Illness Impact on My Life?

A mental illness will have an impact on a person's behaviour, their thought processes, feelings and moods. It follows that a mental illness affects, to a greater or lesser extent, a person's ability to relate to others, to socialise, to work or to study. The effect will differ greatly depending on the kind of illness the person has, whether they receive effective treatment at an early stage, and the support they receive from friends and family.

Is There A Cure?

Although it is considered there is no cure for many mental illnesses such as chronic schizophrenia, almost all disorders can be treated. Medication can help to alleviate symptoms while psychotherapy and counselling can assist a person to better manage their emotions, thinking and behaviour. Practical forms of help and support can also be important to assist someone to enter or rejoin the workforce, or gain greater confidence in their social and interpersonal skills.

What Is Psychosis And A Psychotic Episode?

Psychosis is a severe disturbance in a person's feelings, behaviour, perception and thinking. A person experiencing a psychotic episode loses touch with ordinary reality. Their ability to make sense of both the world around them and their internal world is severely altered. Psychotic episodes are a symptom of several disorders, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A person with bipolar disorder may be depressed or elated out of proportion to current events and act on these in potentially dangerous ways.

People in psychosis often experience:

- **Delusions** - such as paranoid delusions e.g. believing that everybody is plotting against them, or that they are being followed or wanted by the police etc, or grandiose delusions - e.g. thinking that they are someone famous, or psychic.
- **Hallucinations** - seeing, hearing or feeling things that are very real to the person but not experienced by others, e.g. hearing voices.

If I Have a Mental Illness Will I Experience Psychosis?

Not necessarily, as not every mental illness involves losing touch with reality. Psychotic episodes only usually occur with disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression. It is also important to remember that most people who experience a psychotic episode do recover and find ways of managing their illness.

Does My Relative (Friend or Spouse) Have A Mental Illness?

"They have been behaving in an unusual way. I have tried to talk to them about it but they say nothing is wrong."

Certain difficult behaviours can occur due to changes or stressful events in a person's life. We can all find ourselves being irritable, rebellious, shy, argumentative, thoughtless, moody, over sensitive, over emotional, withdrawn or lazy. This does not necessarily mean that we have a mental illness.

These behaviours can all be quite common responses to events such as the break up of a relationship, moving to a new home, exam time, death of someone close, a wedding, a family crisis, birth of a baby, or a physical illness. Often someone will get through a difficult period by talking with friends, their partner or perhaps through taking time out. However, if they seem to be taking a longer time to get over a crisis then it may be important for them to seek help.

Behaviours that may indicate something more serious is going on:

- total withdrawal from friends, colleagues and family
- afraid to leave the home, refusing to go to school
- saying or writing things which do not make sense
- significant changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- extreme changes in mood - from excited to depressed
- a loss of mood variation - becoming flat and unemotional
- deteriorating performance at work or school
- hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see
- believing their thoughts are being interfered with by something or someone external
- believing they are being influenced, harmed or contacted by television, radio, spacemen, the devil etc
- spending extravagant/unrealistic amounts of money or talking about unrealistic business, investment ideas
- believing people are plotting against them.
- believing they have special powers or thinking they are famous or religious or political figures.

These behaviours indicate that something more serious may be happening and the person needs to see a G.P. and/or a mental health professional for an assessment. Drug use can also contribute to certain symptoms - or drugs may be being used by the person to ease the symptoms they are experiencing. These issues are complicated and best sorted out with the help of a professional.

Where Do I Go For Help?

- Mental Health Information Service for information about services in your area:
1300 794 991
- Your local Community Health Centre (see White Pages – under 'C')
- Your local doctor or a General Practitioner at a medical centre
- Australian Counselling Association for referral to a counsellor:1300 784 333

What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists?

Psychiatrists are medically trained doctors who have gone on to train further and specialise in the treatment of mental illness. They can prescribe medication. Psychologists are trained in human behaviour and have studied the brain, memory, learning and human development. They provide various services including assessment and psychological testing and various types of psychotherapy and/or counselling.

Medicare Rebate for Psychologists

A Medicare rebate is now available for up to 12 sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist who has a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, i.e. a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition.

The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost.

For further information about the rebate or to locate a psychologist in your area contact the Australian Psychological Society:

www.psychology.org.au

Tel: 1800 333 497

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW. This and other fact sheets are available for download from www.mentalhealth.asn.au. The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

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