

## What is mental illness? (English)

*This fact sheet is part of the Multicultural Information Series by the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre*

### What is mental illness?

People with a mental illness can experience a distortion in the way they think, feel or behave. In other words, their thinking, feelings and behaviour are all mixed up, or they may not have very much control over their thinking, feelings or behaviour. This significantly interferes with their relationships, their work, and enjoyment of life.

Having a mental illness can be difficult for the person and difficult for the family. It is not something to be ashamed of.

### What causes mental illness?

It is important to understand that having a mental illness is no-one's fault. It is sometimes believed that it is bad blood, or punishment or the evil eye. Today, doctors believe that there are a number of factors which may lead to a mental illness:

- chemical imbalance in the brain
- stress and everyday problems
- exposure to severely distressing experiences.

It is difficult to be absolutely sure about the causes of mental illness in all situations.

### Is mental illness inherited?

Research indicates that some people **may** have a genetic predisposition to developing a mental illness. Because there are many complex factors, it is advisable to discuss this with your doctor.

### Is mental illness contagious?

Mental illness is not like a cold or the measles, it is not contagious.

### What are the main types of mental illness?

#### 1. Anxiety disorders

A person can experience extreme distress, panic or worry. Common symptoms: high blood pressure, increased heart beat, upset stomach, tremors, muscle tension, feeling restless, sleeplessness.

#### 2. Depression

Depression affects a person's mood.

**Mild depression:** Many people experience mild depression in their lives, e.g. sadness, not wanting to do anything.

**Major depression:** Symptoms may include:

- extreme sadness or despair
- a loss of interest in doing anything, e.g. work, hobbies, hygiene
- sleeping problems
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- lack of energy
- suicidal feelings
- sense of guilt
- hopelessness
- feeling worthless.

Depression, whether mild or major can be the result of reactions to life events, e.g. the loss of a loved one, retrenchment from a job. However, it can also have no known external causes.

If you are uncertain of the severity of the depression, please seek professional advice.

### 3. Psychotic disorders

The person loses touch with reality or is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy. Two of the most common psychotic disorders are schizophrenia and manic depressive illness.

**Schizophrenia:** Symptoms may include:

- feeling confused or depressed
- withdrawn from family, friends, and reduced social contact
- hearing voices of people who are not present or that no-one else can hear
- believing that people are wanting to cause them harm
- belief of being someone famous or powerful
- feelings and thoughts may not match, e.g. laughing at a sad thought for no apparent reason
- inability to perform everyday tasks, e.g. looking after personal hygiene or diet.

**Manic depressive illness** affects a person's mood. A person may have extreme mood swings of highs and lows. Symptoms of '**low**' mood may consist of:

- feelings of failure or unworthiness
- suicidal feelings
- sleeping problems
- poor appetite.

Symptoms of '**high**' mood may consist of:

- irritability
- speech may be jumbled because of speaking too quickly
- impulsiveness
- belief in being someone important or having great powers.

### What can be done to help a person?

People experiencing these symptoms should seek medical help. A mental illness is like a physical illness. If the person receives treatment for the illness with consent or before it gets worse, they may be able to recover more quickly.

If you think something is wrong, the sooner you get help or talk to someone, the better. One of the following or a combination can assist the person:

**Medication** can help with some forms of mental illness. It helps to control symptoms.

**Support and counselling** is talking to someone to deal with problems, to help cope with the illness and the symptoms.

**Support groups:** meeting and being with other people with a mental illness. Families getting together who have a member with a mental illness. These groups give people the chance to share experiences, learn about mental illness and support each other.

**Rehabilitation:** learning new ways of coping with daily living. It assists people to make the most of their strengths and abilities.

The aim of this help is to restore respect, dignity and confidence to the mentally ill person.

## Where can I get this help?

**General Practitioner:** Your doctor can offer assistance by referring you to an appropriate service, or in medically treating the mentally ill person.

**Community mental health clinics:** Staff include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, occupational therapists, social workers. They offer different forms of help to the person with a mental illness and/or their families. In some centres, workers are able to visit people at home. In most clinics, a crisis service is available.

**Psychiatric hospitals:** If someone is very sick they may need to be in hospital. People may be taken to hospital involuntarily if there is a risk that they can hurt themselves or others. Once a person is admitted to hospital, their mental health is reviewed regularly. The aim of the hospital admission is to restore a person's mental health as soon as possible so that they can return home.

**Non-government services** are run by local communities. Their main aim is to help someone with a mental illness to live as independently as possible. For example, they can help someone make new friends or sometimes provide accommodation. They do not provide medical treatment or medication.

## Will my problem be kept confidential?

When seeing a health professional, information about your problem cannot be given to anyone else without your permission. If an interpreter is present, they must also keep the information confidential.

It is important for a person with a mental illness to receive treatment in order to get well. The longer the illness remains untreated, the longer it can take for the person to recover.

This fact sheet is available in Arabic, Bosnian, Cambodian, Chinese, Croatian, English, Greek, Italian, Macedonian, Maltese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish and Vietnamese.

## For more information

For more information, please contact the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre.

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Website: [www.health.qld.gov.au/metrosouthmentalhealth/qtmhc/default.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/metrosouthmentalhealth/qtmhc/default.asp)

## Multicultural Information Series

Other titles available in the *Multicultural Information Series* include:

- Coping with mental illness in the family
- Depression is never really 'black and white' - Some facts about depression