

MEDIA BACKGROUNDER

Fact Sheet #3: Understanding Mental Illness

Mental illness is a general term for a group of illnesses that affect the mind or brain. These illnesses, which include bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety and personality disorders, affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts.

Causes of Mental Illness

The exact cause of mental illness is unknown. What is known is that mental illness is NOT a character fault, weakness or something inherently 'wrong' with a person. It is an illness like any other. Some of the factors believed to contribute to mental illness are:

- Changes in brain structure and/or chemistry: these affect the function of the brain and therefore an individual's feelings, thoughts and behaviour.
- Environmental factors. A person's environment, their relationships, family life, trauma, abuse and other stressful life experiences are thought to contribute to, or trigger a mental illness.
- Biological factors. A mental illness may be wholly or partly inherited through the genes, and therefore be part of a person's genetic make up. However, a person may inherit a gene but not experience a mental illness.
- Substance or drug abuse can alter the brain's chemistry making a person vulnerable to mental illness.
- Negative thought patterns. If an individual is vulnerable to mental illness, constant negative thought patterns can worsen the condition.

Who is susceptible to mental illness?

Mental illness directly affects 20% of 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% of this age group.

Early Warning Signs

These differ from person to person, but some common signs are when a person's behaviour changes, suddenly or gradually. These changes in behaviour can sometimes be a reaction to life events, especially for adolescents but if in doubt, seek advice from a G.P. and/or a mental health professional.

Symptoms

There are two categories of mental illnesses and the symptoms experienced by individuals differ, depending on the type of mental illness:

- Psychosis: where a person loses touch with reality
- Mood disorders: where a person experiences over-whelming feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, inability to sleep, loss of interest in things they once enjoyed, changes in appetite etc

These changes, which may happen quickly, or they may be gradual and subtle, make it difficult for the sufferer to cope with work, study, relationships and other demands.

Treatment and Recovery

Unlike other health issues, two-thirds of people with a mental illness do not receive any treatment in any 12 month period. However, with appropriate care, people can recover from mental. One of the most important things that assists recovery is compassion and understanding. A person with a mental illness often faces isolation and discrimination from others as people may react with embarrassment, rejection and abuse if they do not understand the individual's unusual behaviour.

Things to remember

- One in five adults will experience a mental illness at least once in their lives.
- Mental illnesses can be treated.
- Compassion and understanding can help a person in their recovery.