

IS IT ME? UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

Good mental health helps us deal with the ups and downs of life. When our mental health is at its best we are able to think creatively to solve our problems effectively, respond positively to the challenges we face and use our abilities to the fullest. Good mental health helps us to stay in control and balanced, especially during difficult times.

How Resilient Are You?

Consider how you coped with a recent difficulty:

- Did you feel there was no way out of the problem and that life would never be normal again?
- Were you unable to carry on with work or school?
- With time, were you able to enjoy your life, family and friendships?
- Were you able to regain your balance and look forward to the future?

Being mentally healthy enhances your ability to enjoy life and your ability to bounce back after hard times or when things do not go as well as you had hoped. It is important in helping you to maintain balance in your life and to develop your personal strengths.

What is mental illness?

There are different illnesses that affect the mind just as there are diseases which affect the body. Everyone feels stressed or not themselves every now and then. But when these feelings persist and become severe enough to interfere with your daily life it might indicate that you are suffering from a mental illness.

Prevalence

Mental illness is common, affecting about 20% of adults in Australia each year. It is not your fault, or a sign of weakness, if you are affected. Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common illnesses for adults, with between 10% to 20% of people affected at some time in their life. Experts have found that 8 of the 10 leading causes of disability in developed countries world-wide are mental illnesses.¹

What are the causes of mental illness?

The causes of mental illness are not fully understood. For some of the more severe disorders there appears to be a family link, but this is not the case for most mental illnesses. For these people the most likely explanation is a chemical imbalance in the brain that is brought about by stressful life events, drug abuse, physical illness or hormonal changes.

¹ Murray CJL, Lopez AD, eds. *The global burden of disease and injury series, volume 1: a comprehensive assessment of mortality and disability from diseases, injuries, and risk factors in 1990 and projected to 2020*. Cambridge, MA: Published by the Harvard School of Public Health on behalf of the World Health Organization and the World Bank, Harvard University Press, 1996.

Is mental illness life-threatening?

Mental illness itself will not kill you, but people suffering from a severe mental disorder are at higher risk of suicide when compared to the general population. Effective, ongoing treatment is essential to minimise the risk of suicide.²

What are the chances of recovering from mental illness?

Getting the right treatment and support is essential in increasing your chances of recovering from mental illness. Most people with mental illness recover well and are able to lead fulfilling lives in the community. Unfortunately, many people with mental disorders do not seek or receive the help they need. Recognising and then getting help early on when you are finding it difficult to cope, hard to meet and keep friends, are having problems managing at work or losing your enjoyment of life is vital to managing your symptoms effectively.

Warning signs of mental illness

Trust your feelings - if you feel things are becoming too difficult for you to manage on your own, then you should seek professional support. Listed below are just some examples of symptoms that you may have noticed in yourself (or someone close to you). Perhaps there are other signs that you are worried about? If any of these (or others you have noticed that are not listed here) happen *often* or *last for several weeks*, as soon as possible you should see your General Practitioner to discuss them further.

- Feel generally unhappy for no 'real' reason
- Feel life is out of control (in a bad way)
- Find yourself unable to make decisions
- Feel "stuck" or "trapped?"
- Feel very lonely
- Feel anxious and don't know why
- Cry easily and frequently
- Find yourself unable to do your job or schoolwork
- Get very angry frequently and with little provocation
- Gain no pleasure from sex (if you are sexually active)
- Worry about your sexual orientation
- Have trouble sleeping at night, wake frequently or want to sleep all the time
- Withdraw from people
- Eat, drink alcohol, smoke, gamble or spend money excessively to the point where it is causing problems for your health/relationships/work/life
- Over-use drugs (drugs that are either legal or illegal)
- Fear that you are going to abuse your child or spouse
- Have sexual fantasies about your child or other children
- Think about suicide
- Experience significant weight loss or gain without knowing why (e.g. not due to planned dieting)
- Experience extreme changes in behaviour or mood

² http://www.sane.org/Information/Factsheets/Facts_and_Figures.html Copied with permission.

- No longer find pleasure in activities you previously enjoyed.

Take Note!

A person who is thinking or talking about suicide or homicide should seek help immediately.

What do I do if I think I have a mental illness?

Medicines and therapy are available for mental illnesses and can help improve the life of most people who suffer from a mental disorder. It is important first to recognise the symptoms that might indicate a possible mental disorder. Once you think there might be a problem, you should visit your General Practitioner to arrange an assessment and proper diagnosis as early as possible. There are specific criteria to help professionals determine whether the symptoms you are experiencing should be considered a mental illness. The treatment offered will depend on the nature and severity of the disorder.

It is important that you seek professional help when you feel like things are starting to overwhelm you, and particularly if you have felt this way for several weeks. If you are worried by any aspect of your mental health, see your General Practitioner to find out what resources are available to help you.

In crisis call (Australia):

Lifeline

13 11 14 (24 hour Crisis Hotline).

Kids Help Line

1800 55 1800

Online counselling available at <http://www.kidshelpline.com.au>.

Mensline

1300 78 99 78.