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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



learn about

mental disorders

primer fact sheets 2008 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



Mental illness can affect anyone, at any time—and each person responds to it differently.

Next time you're in line at the supermarket or at a bus stop, look around you. How many people do you see? 5? 10? What if we told you that of those 10 people, two have or will have a mental illness? Do you think you can tell which two? You probably won't be able to. That's because mental illness can affect anyone, at any time—and each person responds to it differently.

What is it?

Most of us have heard the words mental illness or mental disorder or psychiatric condition. These terms all mean the same thing. But what do they mean? The term mental illness is used to describe a wide range of different conditions. What they have in common is that they all affect a person's emotions, thoughts and behaviours—how they see themselves, see the world around them, and how they interact in that world. Of course, all of us go through times where our world view changes, but what makes it a disorder is how long it goes on for and how much it negatively impacts your life. There are many different kinds of mental disorders including:

- **Mood disorders**—involve changes and disruptions in a person's mood and emotions. Depression and bipolar disorder are examples of mood disorders.
- **Anxiety disorders**—are the most common type of mental disorder. They cause people to be overly anxious and afraid of situations or events that most people consider normal. Panic disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are anxiety disorders.
- **Schizophrenia**—involves people losing the ability to know what's real and what isn't (this feature is called psychosis). Schizophrenia also makes it difficult for people to think,

mental disorders

could I have a mental disorder?

Although mental illnesses have a lot in common with each other, each group and each type within each group is quite different and the symptoms can look different from person to person. Just like physical illness, symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe, and you don't have to show every possible symptom to have the illness. Probably the best way to know if you might have a mental disorder is if you're not feeling, thinking or acting like yourself—or if people close to you notice changes in your behaviour. Are you experiencing some of the following?

- I suddenly no longer have interest in hobbies or interest I used to love
- I find myself feeling angry or sad for little or no reason
- I don't remember the last time I enjoyed anything
- I have strange thoughts or voices that I can't seem to get rid of
- I don't feel anything anymore
- I used to be healthy, but now I always feel a bit sick
- I eat a lot more or less than I used to
- My sleep patterns have changed
- I feel fear, worry and terror about things in life people around me seem to cope well with
- I have a constant fear that someone is going to hurt me
- I've been missing more and more time from work
- I've been drinking heavily and/or using drugs to cope
- Sometimes I just want to die
- I find myself avoiding family and friends

speak and interact in an organized way. Psychosis is not just a part of schizophrenia, but may also be seen on its own, or with other disorders like mood disorders.

- **Eating disorders**—involve a distorted body image along with serious behaviours to manage food and weight, making it difficult to nourish oneself properly. Eating disorders can be life-threatening. Examples of eating disorders include anorexia and bulimia.
- **Personality disorders**—affect the way a person acts, feels and gets along with other people. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are examples of personality disorders.
- **Substance use disorders (commonly called addictions)**—occur when a person becomes dependent on a substance such as alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.
- **Dementia**—involves the loss of brain cells and results in loss of memory, judgment and reasoning, along with changes in mood, behaviour and communication abilities (beyond what might be seen in normal aging). Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia.
- **Attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADD or ADHD)**—can be diagnosed in adults but is usually found in children and youth and affects their ability to focus their attention. This condition may also include hyperactivity, which is when a person becomes easily over-excited.

Who does it affect?

In BC, mental illness will affect one in 5 people; that's almost 900,000 British Columbians. While mental illness can affect anyone, it does seem to impact certain groups of people more often than others.

- **Youth**—are at higher risk of mental illness than the average population. One study found that 18% of youth had symptoms of a mental disorder compared to 12% of adults. One reason for the higher risk is the amount of change that youth go through, both physically and socially. Studies have shown that gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered youth have higher rates of major depression, generalized anxiety disorder and substance use or dependence.
- **Older adults**—are at increased risk of mental illnesses like depression, Alzheimer's disease, dementia and anxiety disorders. Health problems, loss of a spouse and a shrinking circle of friends are all possible triggers for this.
- **Women**—are more likely than men to have a mental illness, but problem substance use is more common in men. Women are often more comfortable seeking help for their problems than men which likely means that mental illness in men may be highly under-reported. Men and women tend to show the symptoms of their mental illnesses differently.



One thing to keep in mind about mental illness is that the people who have it cannot just “snap out of it.”

- **People with disabilities or chronic illnesses**—are at high risk for anxiety and depression. Examples of chronic illnesses are diabetes, asthma and heart disease. Disabilities can include anything from brain injury to cerebral palsy. Pain, worry, challenges with daily living may all be stressful effects of chronic conditions. Around a third of people with chronic conditions will develop depression.
- **Refugees**—have high rates of mental illness such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the stressful events that forced them to flee their homeland and the difficulties involved in moving to a new country. The research is less clear on rates for immigrants other than refugees.
- **Aboriginal people**—have higher rates of depression, suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use problems. Reasons for this trend are complex and connected, in part, to history and environment.

What can I do about it?

One thing to keep in mind about mental illness is that the people who have it cannot just “snap out of it.” Have you ever had the flu or a broken leg and have a family or friend tell

you to just get over it? Probably not, because you cannot help being sick. It’s the same for someone with mental illness.

There are many treatments available for mental illness, and full recovery is often possible. The kind of treatment that works best for you will depend on your situation, and is best discussed with a doctor or other health care provider. Often people find a combination of approaches works best for them.

Medication: There many different types of mental health medications including medications for mood, for anxiety, for psychosis, for hyperactivity, and for some kinds of dementia.

Counseling: Among the most effective counselling approaches are:

- Cognitive-behavioural therapy — helps people recognize and change thinking patterns and behaviours that are not good for their mental health
- Interpersonal therapy — helps a person look at how they relate to others and deals with specific life issues like grief or conflict.

Other treatments: Less commonly, and for specific situations, other effective treatments may be considered such as light therapy or electroconvulsive therapy.

Support groups: groups of others who are going through what you’re going through groups for family members of someone with a mental illness to meet other families in similar situations

Self-help and lifestyle changes:

- exercising regularly
- eating well
- managing stress
- following healthy sleep patterns
- increasing social activities
- abstaining from or reducing your use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
- recognizing situations that may trigger an illness

mental disorders are not

- » caused by bad parenting
- » a sign of personal weakness or failure
- » punishment for bad deeds
- » caused by spirits or demons
- » contagious
- » anyone’s fault

mental disorders

where do I go from here?

If you think you or a loved one may have a mental disorder, the best thing to do is talk to your doctor. They can help rule out other explanations for what's going on. They can also help you decide which of the above treatments, if any, are the right ones for you.

Other resources, available in English only, are:

BC Mental Health Information Line
Call 1-800-661-2121 (toll-free in BC) or 604-669-7600 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, community resources, or publications.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental disorder.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca. See our section on mental disorders including our Mental Disorders Toolkit. The Toolkit is full of information, tips and self-tests to help you understand your mental disorder.

Kelty Resource Centre

Contact this BC resource centre at www.bcmhas.ca/keltyresourcecentre or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions, including eating disorders support for adults.

Distress Line Network of BC

If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (no area code needed in BC) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.



This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.