

Mental Health and Mental Illness

What is mental health?

According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is a state of emotional and social well-being in which a person can fulfil his or her abilities, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively or fruitfully and be able to make a contribution to his or her community.

With good mental health, we feel good in ourselves and are able to get on with our life smoothly. Whereas, mental health problems affect our feelings, thoughts and actions and can affect our performance and enjoyment in a range of life areas (eg school, work and relationships).

Mental health problems are common mental health complaints which cause distress and can interfere with our enjoyment of life – feeling down is a mental health problem, being tense and angry is a mental health problem, being anxious is a mental health problem. We will all suffer from mental health problems over our life. They are usually understandable reactions to personal and social problems. They are usually not too severe or long lasting.

What is mental illness?

When mental health problems continue for long periods of time and begin to severely affect people's daily life it is possible they may have a mental illness. Mental illness refers to a range of specific conditions, which affect a person's thoughts, feelings, actions and mental functioning (eg memory). They are usually more severe and longer lasting than mental health problems and cause more distress and disruption to the person's life. Where a mental health problem ends and a mental illness begins, is often hard to judge. There are many different types of mental illness and each has its own specific pattern of symptoms.

Although mental illness can occur at any age, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders and psychotic illnesses, often commence in adolescence or early adult life.

Most illnesses develop gradually over a period of weeks or months, however, some develop quite quickly, usually as a result of a stressful life event. They may be one-off problems, occur on a recurring (episodic) basis through the person's life, or lead to on-going persistent symptoms.

What causes mental illness?

Most mental illnesses are caused by the interaction of a number of factors including:

- Biological predisposition (genetic or acquired)
- Adverse early life experiences (eg abuse, neglect, death of parents or other losses and traumas)
- Individual psychological factors (self-esteem, thinking style)
- Current social circumstances (financial, work, relationship or family stress, or adverse life events)

A "single" cause is highly unlikely. Rather an episode of illness appears to occur in a biologically and psychologically predisposed individual, under the trigger of social/environmental stress.

How common are mental health problems?

The vast majority of adolescents and young adults will proceed through life with only a few problems in their mood or behaviour, or difficulties in relationships, work or study. However, a small, but significant minority (20%) will experience more serious problems.

What can be done?

Like physical health problems, the sooner a person gets help for a mental health problem or mental illness, the better the chances of recovery and the less the condition will interfere with their life.

Most young people in need of help seek support from people they know and trust. This usually means their peers, family members or other adults they perceive as caring. They are generally reluctant to seek psychiatric help because of the stigma and myths associated with mental illness.

As a result young people are often more likely to seek psychiatric help through non-psychiatric settings, such as their own doctors, community health centres, youth workers, teachers and other non-government agencies. This means that professionals in these settings are extremely experienced in dealing with many of the young person's emotional difficulties and can, in many instances, be utilised to deal with the more high prevalence problems young people present with. Sometimes however, due to the severity of their symptoms, young people need specialist treatment from a mental health service.

Treatment for mental illness focuses on maximising the factors that protect against illness such as counselling, medication, social support and practical assistance for day to day stresses, and minimising the factors that will trigger illness, such as stress, social isolation or drug abuse.

Services at ORYGEN Youth Health

ORYGEN Youth Health provides mental health services to young people between the ages of 15-24 who live in Western or Northwestern Melbourne.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the ORYGEN Triage worker on 1800 888 320 or via the paging service on 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

- www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- www.sane.org.au
- www.healthinsite.gov.au



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