

# Myths, Misunderstandings & Facts about Mental Illness

Myths, misunderstanding and negative stereotypes and attitudes surround mental illness. They result in stigma, discrimination and isolation of people with mental illness, as well as their families and carers.

Common questions about mental illness are:

## **Are Mental Illnesses a Form of Intellectual Disability or Brain Damage?**

**No.** They are illnesses just like any other: heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. Yet the tradition of flowers, sympathy and support provided to people with physical illness are often denied to those with mental illness.

## **Are Mental Illnesses Incurable and Lifelong?**

**No.** When treated appropriately and early, many people recover fully and have no further episodes of illness.

For others, mental illness may recur throughout their lives and require ongoing treatment. This is the same as many physical illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. Like these other long-term health conditions, mental illness can be managed so that individuals live life to the fullest.

Although some people become disabled as a result of ongoing mental illness, many who experience even very major episodes of illness live full and productive lives.

## **Are people born with a Mental Illness?**

**No.** A vulnerability to some mental illnesses, such as bipolar mood disorder, can run in families. But other people develop mental illness with no family history.

Many factors contribute to the onset of a mental illness. These include stress, bereavement, relationship breakdown, physical and sexual abuse, unemployment, social isolation, and major physical illness or disability. Our understanding of the causes of mental illness is growing.

## **Can anyone develop a mental illness?**

**Yes.** In fact, as many as one in five Australians may develop a mental illness at some stage in their lives. Everyone is vulnerable to mental health concerns.

Many people feel more comfortable with the notion of having 'a nervous breakdown' rather than a mental illness. However, it is important to talk openly about mental illness, as this reduces the stigma and helps people to seek early treatment.

**Are people with a mental illness usually dangerous?**

**No.** In fact, this false perception underlies some of the most damaging stereotypes. People with a mental illness are seldom dangerous. Even people with the most severe mental illness are rarely dangerous when receiving appropriate treatment and support.

**Should people with a mental illness be isolated from the community?**

**No.** Most people with a mental illness recover quickly and do not even need hospital care. Others have short admissions to hospital for treatment. Improvements in treatment over recent decades mean that most people live in their communities, and there is no need for the confinement and isolation that was commonly used in the past.

A very small number of people with mental illness need hospital care, sometimes against their will. Improvements in treatment are making this less and less common, and fewer than one in a 1000 people are treated this way.

**Is stigma one of the biggest problems for people with mental illness?**

**Yes.** One of the biggest obstacles for people recovering from mental illness is confronting the negative attitudes of other people. These often mean that people with mental illness face isolation and discrimination just for having a mental illness

Positive and hopeful attitudes of family, friends, service providers, employers, and other members of the community toward people with mental illness are critical to ensuring quality of life for people with mental illness and supporting recovery.

May, 2007

