



MENTAL ILLNESS – SORTING THROUGH THE CONFUSION

THE FACTS

One in five Australian's will experience a mental illness. 'Mental Illness' is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses in the same way that heart disease refers to a group of illnesses affecting the heart.

Episodes of mental illness can come and go in periods through people's lives. Some people experience their illness only once and fully recover. For others, it recurs throughout their lives.

Most mental illness can be effectively treated.

Though we know that many mental illnesses are caused by a physical dysfunction of the brain, we do not know exactly what triggers this.

Stress may trigger some mental illnesses or may prolong episodes. Stress can also result when a person develops a mental illness.

People who have a mental illness often suffer a great deal. They can be disturbed and frightened by their illness.

Not only do they and their families have to cope with an illness that can radically alter their lives, they often experience rejection and discrimination.

People with mental illness need the same understanding and support given to people with a physical illness. A mental illness is no different – it is not an illness for which anyone should be blamed.

It is rarely possible for someone with a mental illness to make the symptoms go away just by strength of will. To suggest this, is not helpful in any way.

Mental illnesses can be separated into two main categories: psychotic and non-psychotic.

Psychotic Illnesses

A psychosis is a condition caused by any one of a group of illnesses that are known, or thought to affect the brain causing changes in thinking emotion and behaviour.



People experiencing an acute stage of a psychotic illness may lose touch with reality. Their ability to make sense of thoughts, feelings and external information is seriously affected and they may become very frightened.

Psychotic illnesses include schizophrenia and some types of depression.

During an episode of these disorders, people perceive their world differently from normal. During an episode, what they see, hear and feel is real to them. But people around them do not share their experiences.

People with psychoses might develop delusions (false beliefs of persecution, guilt or grandeur) or they may experience hallucinations where they see, hear, smell, taste or feel things, which are not there. They may be depressed or elated out of all proportion to their life circumstances.

To those around them, these episodes can be threatening and perplexing. People who are not familiar with this behaviour may find it difficult to understand the fear and confusion with which people with these conditions live.

Effective medication and support from medical health professionals and counsellors mean that most people who experience psychotic illness are able to live productive and rewarding lives.

Non-Psychotic illnesses

Everyone has experienced strong feelings of depression, sadness, tension or fear.

Some people's feelings can become so disturbing and overwhelming that they have difficulty coping with day-to-day activities such as going to work, enjoying leisure time and maintaining relationships.

These states describe a group of mental illnesses that are called non-psychotic illnesses. They are a common experience for many people and include phobias, anxiety, some forms of depression, eating disorders, and physical symptoms involving tiredness or pain, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Though the symptoms of these disorders are often not evident to others, they cause considerable personal distress.

Most non-psychotic illness can be effectively treated, usually with a combination of medication and therapy, which help the person understand their illness, manage their symptoms, and lead satisfying lives.

Taken from '[Caring for Someone with a Mental Illness](#)'. Information used with permission from the NSW Mental Health Information Service **1300 794 991**