



## Understanding Mental Illness

**Mental illness is a general term for a group of illnesses that affect the mind or brain. These illnesses, which include bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety and personality disorders, affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts.**

### Causes of Mental Illness

The exact cause of mental illness is unknown. What is known is that mental illness is NOT a character fault, weakness or something inherently 'wrong' with a person. It is an illness like any other. Some of the factors believed to contribute to mental illness are:

- Changes in brain structure and/or chemistry. These affect the function of the brain and therefore an individual's feelings, thoughts and behaviour.
- Environmental factors. A person's environment, their relationships, family life, trauma, abuse and other stressful life experiences are thought to contribute to, or trigger, a mental illness.
- Biological factors. A mental illness may be wholly or partly inherited, and therefore be part of a person's genetic make up. However, a person may inherit a gene but not experience a mental illness.
- Substance or drug abuse can alter the brain's chemistry making a person vulnerable to mental illness.
- Negative thought patterns. If an individual is vulnerable to mental illness, constant negative thought patterns can worsen the condition.

### Who is susceptible to mental illness?

Mental illness directly affects 20% of Australians at some stage in their lives, varying from mild or temporary to severe or prolonged. It is even more common among young adults, affecting 25% of this age group. Migration places significant stress on people. Refugees and those fleeing persecution generally experience more stress and are susceptible to mental illness.

### Early Warning Signs

These differ from person to person, but some common signs are when a person's behaviour changes, suddenly or gradually. These changes in behaviour can sometimes be a reaction to life events, especially for adolescents but if in doubt, seek advice from a doctor and/or a mental health professional.

### Symptoms

There are two categories of mental illnesses and the symptoms experienced by individuals differ, depending on the type of mental illness:

- Psychosis: where a person loses touch with reality
- Mood disorders: where a person experiences over-whelming feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, inability to sleep, loss of interest in things they once enjoyed, changes in appetite etc.

These changes, which may happen quickly, or they may be gradual and subtle, make it difficult for the person to cope with work, study, relationships and other demands.

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## Treatment and Recovery

Almost all mental illnesses can be treated or at least lessened in their severity by medication to redress the chemical imbalance and some form of psychotherapy and/or counselling.

One of the most important things that will assist recovery is compassion and understanding. A person with a mental illness often faces isolation and discrimination from others as people may react with embarrassment, rejection and abuse if they do not understand the individual's unusual behaviour.

Culture influences many aspects of mental health and it is important that a person's background is considered when treatment options are sought.

It is important to remember that one in five adults will experience a mental illness at least once in their lives, mental illnesses can be treated and compassion and understanding can help a person in their recovery.

## Further information

Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA) is a national programme funded by the Australian Government that works closely with mental health specialists, consumer and carers, advocacy groups and tertiary institutions to promote mental health and suicide prevention for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] backgrounds through campaigns, resources and information fact-sheets. Contact MMHA: phone: 02 9840 3333, fax: 02 9840 3388, email: [admin@mmha.org.au](mailto:admin@mmha.org.au), website: [www.mmha.org.au](http://www.mmha.org.au)

