



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

learn about mental illnesses

info sheets 2014 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? Five? 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?

The term 'mental illness' is a general term for many different experiences. There are many different kinds of mental illnesses, and each illness can cause different symptoms or affect someone's life in very different ways. 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 an illness is how long it goes on for and how it impacts your life. Different kinds of mental illnesses include:

- **Mood disorders** disrupt your mood and emotions. Depression and bipolar disorder are examples of mood disorders.
- **Anxiety disorders** are the most common type of mental illness. They cause you to experience unexpected anxiety or cause you to be fearful of situations or events that most people consider normal. Panic disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are anxiety disorders.
- **Psychotic disorders** affect your ability to sense what's real and what isn't (this is called psychosis). Schizophrenia, the most common psychotic disorder, also makes it difficult for people to think, speak and interact in an organized way.

mental illnesses

could I have a mental illness?

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 illness 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 activities 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 hear 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'm using alcohol or drugs to cope with problems
- ☐ Sometimes I just want to die
- ☐ I find myself avoiding family and friends

- **Eating disorders** involve a distorted body image along with serious behaviours to manage food and weight, making it difficult to nourish yourself properly. Examples of eating disorders include anorexia and bulimia.
- **Personality disorders** affect the way you feel, act, and form relationships with others. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder is an example of a personality disorder.
- **Substance use disorders** (commonly called addictions) occur when you become 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** (ADHD) can be diagnosed in adults but is usually found in children and youth. It affects your ability to focus your attention. It may also include hyperactivity, which is when you become 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** experience many different changes, both physically and socially. In 2009, about 3% of Canadians aged 12-19 said they experience a mood disorder and about 4% said that they experience an anxiety disorder. A major concern for young people is that mental health problems may be treated as "just a phase" or simply not recognized as a real problem.
- **Older adults** may experience increased risk of mental illnesses like depression and anxiety disorders. Health problems, loss of a loved one, and a shrinking circle of friends are all possible triggers for this. The risk of illness like Alzheimer's disease and other dementias increases as you age.
- **Women** are more likely than men to experience a mental illness, but problem substance use is more common in men. Women are often more likely to seek help for their problems than men, so mental illness in men may be highly under-reported. Men and women tend to show the symptoms of 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** may experience higher risk of 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 experience depression.
- **Refugees** may experience higher 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.
- **Aboriginal people** may experience 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 antidepressants, antipsychotics, stimulants, antianxiety medications, and others.
- **Counselling:** There are many different kinds of counselling or ‘talk therapy, such as:
 - Cognitive-behavioural therapy or CBT—Helps you look at the way your thoughts, actions, and behaviours work together. It’s a common first choice for depression and anxiety, and it has been adapted to help with other mental health problems.
 - Interpersonal therapy or IPT—Helps you look at your relationships and helps with specific life issues like grief or conflict.
 - Dialectical behaviour therapy or DBT—Combines CBT with mindfulness, awareness, acceptance, and other skills.
- **Other treatments:** Depending on your specific situation, other 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

Our info sheet “Picking the Support Group that’s Right for You” can help you find good support options. You’ll find it at www.heretohelp.bc.ca.

- **Self-help and lifestyle changes:**

- Exercising regularly
- Eating well
- Managing stress
- Following healthy sleep patterns
- Increasing social activities
- Managing the way you use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Recognizing situations that may trigger an illness

mental illnesses 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 illnesses

where do I go from here?

If you think you or a loved one may have an illness, 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 include:

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 illness.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for info sheets and personal stories about many different mental illnesses. You'll also find more information, tips and self-tests to help you understand and take control of your mental health.

Kelty Mental Health

Contact Kelty Mental Health at www.keltymentalhealth.ca or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

Your Local Crisis Line

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

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 talk with 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.



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BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

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 Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at 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.