



Mental Illness

What is a Mental Illness?

Mental Illnesses are disorders affecting one or more functions of the mind. They interfere with emotion, thought processes, behaviour and perception. A mental illness causes variable amounts of stress and suffering to the person involved.

People should seek help to overcome a mental illness just as they do for any other illness of the body. Mental illness is not characterised by retardation or lower intellectual capacity, nor is it explained by an individual not living up to society's expectations.

Around 20% of people will experience some form of mental illness in their lifetime. The frequency and severity of mental illnesses vary from person to person. Some psychotic episodes are short-lived and occur irregularly. Other people may have a recurring, lifelong battle. With support and medication, most people with mental illness can lead rewarding lives.

Types

Mental illness can be broadly classified as psychotic or non-psychotic. There is not always a clear distinction between the two.

What is Psychosis?

Psychosis refers to a state where people lose contact with reality and/or create a reality of their own. People with schizophrenia and manic depression (bipolar disorder) have episodes of psychosis.

What is Neurosis?

Non-psychotic illnesses are characterised by neurosis. This is when a sense of reality is maintained but thinking and behaving become dysfunctional and suffering results. Neurosis may result from the interaction of stress and vulnerable personality. Such illnesses include:

- Anxiety;
- Depression;

- Obsessions; and
- Personality disorders.

Symptoms

A mental illness develops gradually and early signs sometimes include: anxiety, depression, insomnia, tension, sweating and difficulty in concentration. We may all experience these symptoms occasionally. However, they can be a problem if they are persistent and cause distress.

“Mental illness interferes with emotion, thought processes, behaviour and perception”

Symptoms of psychosis include:

- **Hallucinations** - seeing, hearing and feeling something that is not real.
- **Delusions** - false beliefs not consistent with reality. They may be intense paranoia or visions of grandeur.

People with schizophrenia typically have the above symptoms and thought disorders. Bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic depression) is distinguished by massive mood swings and incidence of psychosis. Individuals can have delusions of grandeur, feel they are on top of the world, or become agitated and irritable. Symptoms may severely affect lifestyle and relationships and can include even longer periods of clinical depression.

Common non-psychotic disorders and their symptoms include:

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder** - a fear, dread, tension and nerves upsetting life.
- **Phobias and Panic Attacks** - can also interfere when specific situations are anticipated.
- **Agoraphobia** - one of the most debilitating of anxiety disorders marked by a fear of being in

a public place, the individual often ends up house bound.

- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** - a compulsive act of repeatedly checking over a certain thought or mental image.
- **Clinical Depression** - enduring feelings of unhappiness and despair with disturbance in sleep, appetite and concentration.

Mental Illness in the community

Mental illness is gradually becoming better understood in society. Gone are the days when people with mental illnesses had limited rights or were confined in hospitals for the insane, and community and authority attitudes were governed by ignorance.

However, mental illnesses have lagged behind other disorders of the body in gaining acceptance from the community. People experiencing mental illness require support, acceptance and understanding. They have rights like anyone else.

People are often fearful of strange or unusual behaviour. This is a normal reaction. However, consider the person and the illness they endure. At times they could be lonely, disturbed or very frightened.

“People who are mentally ill require support, acceptance and understanding”

A person who is mentally ill may also have lower self-esteem. Discrimination from people around them can create this. They may find it difficult to get adequate housing, employment and custody of children. They do not need to face further stigma and alienation from people who are not disadvantaged in this way.

Whilst the causes may be complex, ongoing research is attempting to provide answers to how and why particular mental illnesses develop. In addition, emphasis is being placed on the required

support and education needs of those who experience mental illness as well as society as a whole.

Research Programs

Because less is understood about mental illnesses than physical ones, a number of research projects using varied techniques are currently being undertaken by the Institute. Visit our website or request our latest Annual Report to find out more about what's happening in the following laboratories:

- Behavioural Neuroscience Laboratory
- Rebecca L Cooper Laboratories
- Molecular Psychopharmacology
- Clinical Research Group
- Oxidative Stress Laboratories
- Synaptic Neurobiology Laboratory

Support and Information Services

- The Victorian Mental Health Library
Royal Melbourne Hospital
Tel: (03) 9342 8617 Fax: (03) 9342 8615
www.mh.org.au/library/rmh/
- Mental Health Foundation Australia
270 Church Street, Richmond 3121
Tel: (03) 9427 0406 Fax: (03) 9427 1294
www.mentalhealthvic.org.au
- Sane Australia
Tel: 1800 18 7263
www.sane.org

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