

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a nation-wide, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. For more information about the CMHA and our services, please go to [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

# Mental Illness



[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)



[bell.ca/letstalk](http://bell.ca/letstalk)



[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

# What is Mental Illness?

What do you think of when you hear that someone has a mental illness? If you are like many people, your reaction may be one of concern, fear, confusion or even aversion. This pamphlet is designed to clear up some of the misconceptions around mental illness and provide you with the facts. Mental health issues affect Canadians of all ages, genders, cultures, educational and income levels. The economic and societal impact of mental illness touches everyone in our country, sparing no one from its touch.

All of us will have tough times in our lives when our emotions and thoughts are in turmoil; in spite of them we usually manage to cope and carry on with day to day living. However for some people, the unrelenting intensity of their emotions and the persistent chaotic nature of their thought patterns significantly interfere with their lives. Unless treatment is provided to help them regain their emotional footing, they continue to be overwhelmed.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) describes mental illness as, "...characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour (or a combination), and impaired functioning over an extended period of time. The symptoms vary from mild to severe depending on the type, the individual, the family and socio-economic environment".

A disease of the mind is like a disease of the body. No one chooses the illness and with proper assessment, treatment and support, recovery is possible. It's time to stop treating diseases of the mind differently than diseases of the body. It's time to start treating people.

## Mental illness affects everyone

Studies indicate that in any given year, one in every five Canadian adults under age 65 will have a mental health problem. It is estimated that every Canadian will be indirectly affected because a friend, family member or colleague suffers from a mental health issue.

Many illnesses first develop in adolescence or young adulthood, affecting people at a time in their lives when they are establishing important relationships, self-confidence and educational or career paths. This can have a devastating effect on young people and their families if left unrecognized and untreated.

## What causes mental illness?

Ongoing research points to a complex combination of genetics, biology, physical and social environments as the main contributors to mental illness. There is no simple answer but we can say that the brain and the body interact in ways that produce the symptoms. In addition, lifestyle, family environment, economic status, substance abuse, stress levels and trauma can play a role in the onset, or relapse of symptoms.

## Is there a cure?

Mental illnesses are chronic diseases; in other words, they are life-long. That is NOT to say that the symptoms are always active. With treatment and support, the symptoms of mental illness are treatable and the disease can go into remission.

## How is mental illness treated?

A proper assessment of the person's condition is the first important step. In general once a diagnosis is made, a combination of medication, counseling, support and training will be provided by a team of mental health professionals. The

family is often included as part of the team because they need to give, and receive, support.

Community support is particularly important for individuals with mental health issues because this is where they live, work and play. Re-integration to their former lives and resumption of their activities are key factors in full recovery. Community mental health agencies are vital in enabling people to achieve these goals.

## Types of Mental Illness

For a more complete description of each type of mental illness, please go to [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) and click on "Understanding Mental Illness".

### Anxiety Disorders

Affecting around 12 per cent of Canadians, this category includes disorders such as:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** – Characterized by excessive, uncontrollable and persistent worrying
- **Phobias and panic disorders** – A person experiences overwhelming fears
- **Obsessive-compulsive behaviour** – Persistent, unwarranted thoughts result in certain patterns of behaviour
- **Post-traumatic stress** – Persistent altered behaviour and symptoms following a life event which caused intense fear and horror

Anxiety disorders are often misunderstood. Family and friends may blame their loved ones' behaviour on a lack of self-discipline or inexplicable fixations. Anxiety disorders are conditions that respond to counseling, group therapy and medication; they can be effectively treated in the community.

### Concurrent Disorders and Dual Diagnosis

Concurrent diagnosis refers to a condition where mental illness and a substance use problem with drugs, alcohol or gambling exist. A study conducted in Alberta showed that almost a third of people with mental illness have a substance use problem and almost a third of those with alcohol dependency also have a psychiatric problem. For those using illegal drugs, almost half had a mental illness. Concurrent disorders are often difficult to identify because the challenges associated with one illness often mask the symptoms of the other.

Treatment for concurrent disorders varies because it depends on the mental illness and the substance involved.

In Canada, we refer to someone coping with a developmental disability as well as a mental illness as having a dual diagnosis. Scientists and academics have been challenged to apply standard definitions and criteria for what constitutes a developmental disability, but in general it is used to describe significantly below average intellectual abilities and difficulties with day to day function. Based on that loose definition, it has also been observed that people with developmental disabilities are three to four times more likely to develop

emotional, behavioural and psychiatric difficulties than the general population.

### Dementia

Dementia is the term used for a general decline in a person's mental function. Someone with dementia may experience trouble with things like memory, language, simple calculations, planning and judgment. Dementia can result from injury to the brain due to trauma (head injury), low oxygen levels, cardiovascular conditions, degenerative disorders, drug or alcohol abuse and medical conditions such as kidney or liver disease.

Rehabilitation and supportive care are used to assist the individual with dementia in managing their day to day lives.

### Eating Disorders

While the label "eating disorder" leads one to think these conditions are about food fixations, the truth is they are actually about deep-seated problems that people find too difficult or painful to deal with directly. They mask issues about identity, self-concept and self-esteem and are more prevalent amongst females than males. This type of mental illness has the highest mortality rate of any other mental health challenge; 10 to 20 per cent of people with eating disorders die from the disease or complications relating to it.

Included in this grouping are:

**Anorexia nervosa** – Extreme food reduction with severe, even life-threatening weight loss

**Bulimia nervosa** – A preoccupation with body image that results in frequent fluctuations in weight when an individual binge eats and then purges food by vomiting, or use of laxatives and diuretics

**Binge eating** – Cyclical bouts of compulsive eating followed by chronic dieting are common patterns of this illness

Eating disorders are treated after thorough medical assessment by nutritional guidance, support, ongoing follow up, individual and group therapy. Family therapy is also quite common because of the impact these disorders have on the whole family.

## Mood Disorders

The onset of these types of disorders commonly occurs during adolescence and has a major economic impact on our society in terms of lost work productivity and increased health care costs.

- **Depression** – Causes severe and persistent feelings of worthlessness, self-blame and sadness
- **Bipolar disorder** – Also known as manic depression, bipolar causes a person to swing from periods of serious depression to extreme irritability and euphoric highs
- **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** – Depression that appears to follow a seasonal pattern, typically experienced in the winter

Depression responds well to medication and counseling; bipolar disorders also benefit from appropriate medication and psychotherapy. SAD has been successfully treated with light therapy,

increased exposure to sunlight, exercise, antidepressants and counseling.

## Personality Disorders

People are often described as having certain kinds of “personality traits”. These traits or characteristics influence the way people experience the events and relationships in their lives.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, people with personality disorders, “...reflect traits that are used inappropriately and become maladaptive”.

While some of these characteristics may only mildly influence a person’s behaviour and have little impact on the individual’s home or work life, others may have traits that are greatly disruptive to their life and relationships. Symptoms usually appear in childhood or early adolescence and tend to persist throughout life.

**A fairly inflexible pattern of behaviour can include any or all of the following symptoms:**

- Ongoing irritability, intolerance, suspiciousness and/or paranoia
- Chaotic thoughts and emotions
- Tumultuous relationships and difficulties getting along with others
- Poor impulse control

Personality disorders are challenging to treat because of self-denial around the presence of any problem. Unless behaviours lead to a crisis of some kind, many people with personality disorders will

not seek, or stick with, a treatment plan. For those who do, antidepressants, mood stabilizers and psychotherapy have been beneficial.

## Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is often incorrectly referred to as giving someone a “split personality”. One of the most infamous and least understood of the mental illnesses, schizophrenia is a chronic (lifelong) brain disease that impairs a person’s ability to differentiate between what is real and what is not. As a result, people with schizophrenia can have psychotic episodes where they suffer from hallucinations, delusions and paranoia. Schizophrenia affects about one per cent of the Canadian population and typically strikes first when a person is an adolescent or young adult.

Schizophrenia is a treatable, medical condition. Treatments are particularly effective if symptoms are identified early, an assessment is done and appropriate medication and counseling are started. In fact, if treatment is begun early enough, the impact of a psychotic episode can be greatly reduced or even avoided. Please go to our website [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) for more information; in addition you can download CMHA’s pamphlets on “Schizophrenia”; “Psychosis”; “Early Psychotic Intervention”; and “Youth and Psychosis”.

## Suicide is not a mental illness.

Suicide is not a mental illness; however it can be a tragic outcome for someone who is experiencing mental health challenges as well as life events that leave them feeling hopeless, helpless and desperate. If you are concerned that someone is contemplating suicide, please learn more about it at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca); look for the warning signs and talk with the person directly.

The single most important thing you can do is listen attentively without judgment. It is critical for you to know that talking about suicide will not increase the chances that someone will act on it; in fact talking about it will decrease that likelihood.

If you are the person who is contemplating suicide, know that others have been where you are and have regained their will to live after reaching out and sharing their feelings with a trusted person.

*You don't have to be alone; let someone help you.*