

Major Mental Illnesses

Signs and Symptoms

The following is an overview of the major mental illnesses. There are many brochures regarding specific illnesses available from your mental health professional or community mental health organizations. You may not experience all of the symptoms listed for each illness.

Who Becomes Mentally Ill?

- It can affect anyone, regardless of age, ethnic background, income or gender.
- One in five Canadians has or will develop a mental illness.
- Sometimes mental illness is complicated by drug and alcohol use.

Addictions and Mental Disorders

Studies estimate that up to 50% of people who use mental health services also report having alcohol and drug problems. People who experience a mental illness and use alcohol, cannabis, or other substances excessively are said to have a “dual diagnosis” or “concurrent disorder”. People may use drugs or alcohol to reduce the symptoms of mental illness, or to lessen the side effects of prescribed medications. However, substance use often reduces the effectiveness of prescription drugs, can worsen symptoms and complicates the diagnosis, treatment and care process. It is important to address alcohol and drug issues as part of your recovery plan.

Mood Disorders

Depression (as a disorder on its own or a part of bipolar disorder)

Refers to severe and prolonged feelings of discouragement, frustration and even a sense of despair. Multiple causes such as specific, distressing life events, a biochemical imbalance in the brain or persistent psychological factors such as a negative or pessimistic view of life.

Common symptoms of depression:

- Irritability.
- Anxious mood.
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Loss of energy and excessive fatigue.
- Physical aches and pains.
- Diminished ability to think and concentrate.
- Feeling bored and not interested in many aspects of your life.
- Imagining you have an illness such as cancer when there are no physical indications.
- Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness
- Possibility of suicidal thoughts
- Changes in personal grooming
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Inability to experience joy or pleasure

Bi-Polar Disorder

Refers to the “two poles” of the continuum of mood with alternating periods or cycles of mania (highs) and depression (lows) as described previously.

Common symptoms of mania:

- Persistently high or irritable.
- Decreased need for sleep.
- Appetite disturbance.
- Excessive spending.
- Reckless and impulsive behaviour.
- Inflated ideas about what you are capable of doing – grandiose thoughts.
- Delusional and psychotic thinking.
- Hyper sexuality
- Heightened senses to colour, noise, and smell
- Accelerated thoughts and speech.

Schizoaffective Disorder

This term is used when a person has both a mood disorder and a psychotic disorder within the same period of illness. This does not mean you have two disorders but a combination of symptoms. The depressive type of schizoaffective disorder is accompanied by symptoms such as loss of energy, concentration impairment, guilt, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts. At the same time, the person experiences psychotic symptoms such as delusions, extreme paranoia, or hearing voices.

The manic type of schizoaffective disorder often takes the form of elation, with increased self-confidence and grandiosity. The person may feel energized, but may act inappropriately in social situations, and have trouble concentrating. Symptoms of psychosis are also present, and the person’s behaviour is markedly different from usual.

Psychosis

The word “psychosis” is used to describe conditions that affect the mind, in which there has been some loss of contact with reality. When someone experiences the symptoms of psychosis, their condition is referred to as a psychotic episode. It affects an individual’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Some people experience psychosis as a part of their mental illness or as a result of using or withdrawing from drugs and alcohol. It is most likely to occur in young adults. About 3 out of every 100 people experience a psychotic episode in their lifetime. It occurs equally in males and females and across all cultures and levels of socio-economic status.

Most people make a full recovery from the experience.

Common signs and symptoms of psychosis:

- Disorganized or confused thinking.
- Reduced concentration, attention
- Reduced drive and motivation, lack of energy
- Sleep disturbance
- Anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Behavioural changes, irritability
- Hallucinations or delusions
- Disorganized speech

Anxiety Disorders

A group of disorders which affect behaviour, thoughts, emotions and physical health. Caused by biological and situational circumstances. Heightened and continuing response to a perceived threat.

Types of anxiety disorders:

General Anxiety Disorder

- Repeated and excessive worries lasting at least six months pertaining to routine life events and activities like work, relationships, finances and family.

Panic Attacks

- Fear of imminent death leading to heart palpitations, choking, nausea, faintness, dizziness, chest pain and sweating.

Panic Disorder

- Fear of situations which may cause a panic attack.

Phobias

- Overwhelming feelings of terror in response to a specific object, situation or activity.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

- Repetitive actions used to cope with recurring or unwanted thoughts.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- A sense of re-experiencing a traumatic event for months and sometimes years after the incident.

Schizophrenia

Refers to an illness in which the changes in behaviour or symptoms have been present for a period of at least six months. Caused by a chemical disturbance of the brain's functioning. Affects one out of every 100 people.

Common Symptoms:

- Hearing voices, hallucinations, may affect any/all the senses.
- Confused thinking, feeling ambivalent because you can't make a decision.
- Paranoia and other delusional thinking
- Disjointed thoughts.
- Overwhelming thought – thoughts snowball, build until your senses are over stimulated.
- Thought withdrawal – your mind goes blank
- Thinking that you can control someone else's thoughts or that someone is controlling your thoughts.
- Righteousness.
- Lack of motivation.
- Social withdrawal.
- Feeling that objects or events are meant as personal signs or omens.
- Religious preoccupation.

Eating Disorders

Involve distorted body images that make it difficult for people to nourish themselves in a healthy way. Most common in women and men under age 30. Types:

Anorexia Nervosa

- Dramatic weight loss due to fasting and excessive exercise.

Bulimia Nervosa

- Binge eating followed by self-induced vomiting or other forms of purging.

Personality Disorders

Involve patterns of thinking, mood, social interaction and impulsiveness that cause distress to those experiencing them and others.

Types of personality disorders:

Borderline Personality Disorder

- Difficulty maintaining positive relationships.

Paranoid Personality Disorder

- Overwhelming distrust and suspiciousness of others.

Antisocial Personality Disorder

- Impulsive behaviour, aggression and violations of the rights of others.
For more information on mental illnesses and their symptoms log on to www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre

Treatment & Recovery

Treatment for any mental illness, whether or not it is complicated by drug and alcohol misuse, should occur as soon as symptoms appear.

Recommended treatment involves a combination of approaches:

- **EDUCATION** – To help you and your family/support system understand the illness, its causes and effects and ways of dealing with symptoms.
- **MEDICATION** – New ones are now available with fewer unpleasant side effects than older medications.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPY OR COUNSELLING** - To help you understand what is happening, change your lifestyle to optimize the chances for recovery and learn new skills such as problem solving and relaxation techniques.
- **SOCIAL, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION SUPPORT** – You may need support to stay at your job, or in school. This is important so you maintain skill development and continuation of income and do not become cut off from friends and workmates. Research has shown that people who experience mental illness have fewer relapses when their family or other support system is involved in their care and treatment. The same is true when substance misuse is involved. If friends and family are knowledgeable and informed, they are in a better position to support you.