

What is Happening to Me?

Answers to Questions about My Journey with a Mental Illness

The following attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions a person with mental illness and their loved ones may ask during the journey.

What is mental illness?

Mental illness is a broad term for large categories of mental disorders such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, personality disorders, substance use disorders and addictions, and Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. The symptoms of mental illness can be mild, moderate or severe and may appear at different times in a person's life. We know one in five British Columbians have or will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives.

Mental illness is not the same as being mentally handicapped or challenged, or what is now known as a developmental disability. People who are developmentally challenged as a result of a genetic disorder such as Down's Syndrome are born with developmental delays that can affect a person's intellectual development and functioning.

In contrast, mental illness affects a person's thinking, feeling and behaviour. It cuts across age, gender, economic, ethnic and political boundaries. Mental illness is treatable where most people recover to lead meaningful and productive lives.

Why me?

Mental illness can happen to anyone. Mental illness is nobody's fault. It is not the result of bad parenting, emotional weakness or personal failure. Most people with mental illness are productive members of society. They have jobs, relationships, family, and hobbies and are active members of their communities. Some of the most exceptional and influential people in the world have publicly disclosed that they have a mental illness. It may seem that sometimes due to setbacks you may find it hard to achieve these things. It is important to have hope.

Why do I feel so out of control?

Recovery from the illness is only one part of the process. Many individuals with mental illness must also rebuild a sense of self-worth and recover from the side effects of unemployment, long periods in treatment settings and the stigma and discrimination attached to mental disorders. Reclaiming these aspects of your life are sometimes more difficult than recovering from illness itself. Crushed dreams may take a long time to mend especially if you are young and have had few opportunities to direct your life. Give it time.

Why am I sleeping so much/so little?

Sleep patterns often get disrupted when a person is experiencing mental illness. Some of the side effects of medications to treat your illness may also disrupt your sleep patterns.

Why am I gaining/losing weight?

Mental illness impacts each person differently. There are some medications that have an impact on your weight. Medications can increase your appetite and metabolism. This is an unpleasant side effect but don't go off your medication because you are gaining or losing weight. Talk to your doctor about your weight gain/loss. There may be ways to address this as a team. It is also important to maintain a healthy diet and get as much exercise as possible so you can keep any weight gain/loss under control.

Why do I feel so anxious and restless?

Feeling anxious or restless may be a symptom of your mental illness, a side effect of your medication or a part of your life circumstances. It is important to identify and try to reduce those things in your life that make you anxious. Try some relaxation techniques and exercise will definitely help. You may need to find someone professional to talk to about what is making you feel this way.

Why am I afraid of leaving the house?

Stimulating circumstances may be really hard to handle when you are in the early stages of your recovery. It takes time to get back to doing things you used to enjoy. Family gatherings, crowds and situations where there is lots of noise, lights, colours and sounds may be hard to handle for some time.

Why do I have difficulty concentrating?

The symptoms of your illness and/or the side effects of the medications may impact your ability to concentrate but they have not impacted your intelligence. If you feel comfortable, let people know this is what you are experiencing and ask for things to be clarified if you don't understand something.

Why has my sexual desire changed so much?

Your sexual drive may increase or decrease as a result of your illness or a side effect of the medication to treat your illness. It is important to speak with your partner, mental health worker and doctor about this change and about your feelings if there is a significant change.

Why don't my friends/family/neighbours/co-workers understand?

Some people shy away from people with mental disorders, but in some cases it is not the person with mental illness we fear but our lack of knowledge about the illness. Unfortunately the media and movies have perpetuated misconceptions about mental illness. Additionally, some people are uncomfortable and don't know what to say. Try to give them a break. In time, they may come around. Make sure you surround yourself with supportive people. You are still interesting and intelligent.

Why have some of my friends/family left me?

There are situations some people just cannot handle because they lack compassion and understanding or they need to take a step back for their

own mental health, learning and/or acceptance. For others, the symptoms associated with your illness make them uncomfortable and they find it hard to be around you. It is unfortunate but it is a part of life. Through your journey, you will meet new friends who are understanding of your experience and able to see beyond your illness. Move on.

What can I do? Some things to remember

- Willpower has nothing to do with eliminating illness.
- Counting your blessings or looking on the bright side is an impossible task for someone who is ill, unless they know someone really cares.
- Keeping busy or getting a hobby are valuable tools, but only when the person is well enough to take the first step. Try not to take on too much at once.
- Trying harder may only compound the illness. Try to relax and not fight the feelings. They will pass.
- Spirituality, religion and faith may have a part in your recovery /healing, but only if they are rooted in feelings of mental and emotional health, not illness.
- It may be helpful to examine the stressful aspects of your life that contribute to the severity of your illness.
- It really helps to have someone who will listen unconditionally. Find someone who will be patient and not frightened by what is said. Meaningful relationships are very important for your sense of self-worth and happiness.

Things to think about your recovery

- Professional help is one factor in recovery – help is also found through self-help groups, family support, social support, adult education, meaningful employment, adequate housing and self-care.
- Recovery can be everyone's business – a key aspect of recovery is the presence of people who believe in and stand by the person in need of recovery.
- Recovery is possible even though symptoms may reoccur – the episodic nature of mental illness does not rule out recovery.
- Recovery is not a linear process – unexpected growth or insights may follow periods of little change. A relapse does not mean progress is suddenly undone.
- Recovery from the consequences of mental illness is sometimes more difficult than recovering from the illness itself – e.g. Dealing with stigma, lowered self—esteem, discrimination in employment and housing
- Successful recovery does not mean the person was never really mentally ill – because of the inaccurate assumption that people with serious mental illness, especially schizophrenia, cannot recover, people who do get better are sometimes wrongly believed to have been misdiagnosed.
- Recovery can mean many things to many people. Think about what recovery means to you.

Sources

- William Anthony, Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation.
- Fact Sheets on Mental Health and Addictions Issues – BC Partners for Mental Health and Addiction Information.