

A mental illness is an illness that affects a person's brain and behaviour. Episodes of mental illness can come and go throughout a person's life. Some people have only one episode, whilst others experience a number of episodes in their lifetime.

## ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

### Some of the major mental illnesses you may have heard of include:

**Schizophrenia** A disorder of the brain which causes people to lose touch with reality (it has nothing to do with having a split personality). The illness takes them into another world. People with schizophrenia may also experience hallucinations (hearing voices or seeing/feeling/tasting/smelling something that is not really there) and delusions (false beliefs such as thinking someone is out to get them).

**Bipolar** Involves extreme mood swings – from depression and sadness to joy and excitement.

**Depression** It is important to realise that there is a difference between normal unhappiness and sadness in everyday life and depression as a mental illness. Depression involves long term or excessive depressed mood that affects a person's everyday life. Depression can involve loss of sleep and or appetite, lack of energy and problems concentrating.

### Eating disorders (Anorexia and Bulimia)

These illnesses involve an obsession with having control over weight, eating and food.

- People with **anorexia** try to control the amount of food they eat. Symptoms include the loss of at least 15% of body weight, thinking they are much larger than they really are, exercising obsessively, and being preoccupied with the preparation of food.
- People with **bulimia** feel out of control with food. Symptoms include eating binges followed by purging.

**Anxiety disorders** Most people get anxious when they see a situation as dangerous or stressful. You would probably feel tense, upset and uncomfortable.

But for some people, the anxiety gets to an extreme. Anxiety disorders include, for example:

- Phobias - you might have heard of arachnophobia (fear of spiders)
- Panic disorder - having panic attacks

### Some common myths surrounding mental illness include:

**Mental illness is a form of brain damage or intellectual disability**

**WRONG!** - Mental illnesses are just like any other illness such as diabetes or asthma.

**Mental illnesses are incurable and lifelong**

**WRONG!** - If treated early and in the right way, many people fully recover. Mental illnesses can be like other illnesses that need lifelong treatment such as diabetes, but someone with a mental illness can live a relatively normal life.

**People are born with a mental illness**

**WRONG!** - There is no definite single cause of mental illness. Many other factors contribute to the onset of a mental illness, including stress, abuse, and life events.

**All people with mental illness are dangerous**

**WRONG!** - This myth is the cause of some very negative stereotypes. People with mental illness are rarely dangerous. Even people experiencing severe episodes are hardly ever dangerous when they are getting the correct treatment.



**Mental illness can be separated into two categories:**

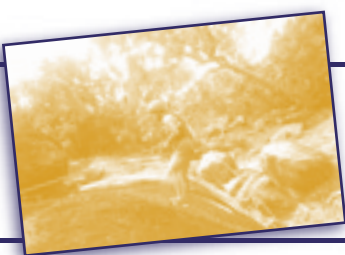
**PSYCHOTIC ILLNESSES**

- A psychosis affects the brain, causing changes in thinking, emotion and behaviour.
- When a person is experiencing an acute stage of psychotic illness, they may lose touch with reality and perceive their world differently from normal. They may become very frightened.
- When a person is having a psychotic episode, some people might feel threatened by their behaviour. It may be difficult to understand how confused and afraid the person is.
- Effective medication and support from professionals and counsellors can help people with psychotic illnesses to lead positive and satisfying lives.
- Includes schizophrenia and some types of depression.

**NON-PSYCHOTIC ILLNESSES**

- Everyone experiences strong feelings of sadness, depression and fear. For some people, these feelings can become so overwhelming and disturbing that they have difficulty coping with day-to-day activities such as work and relationships.
- Even though the signs of these illnesses are not obvious to everyone around them, they can cause a lot of distress to the person affected.
- Most of these illnesses can be treated with a mixture of medication and therapy.
- Includes depression, phobias (acute fears), anxiety, and eating disorders.

The information contained in this fact sheet has been sourced from MindMatters: Understanding Mental Illnesses and [www.health.nt.gov.au](http://www.health.nt.gov.au)



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