



This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

## MENTAL HEALTH - MENTAL ILLNESS

### The Issue

Most Canadians are affected by mental illness, either directly or indirectly, through family, friends or colleagues. Yet there is still a stigma attached to this range of diseases that is a barrier to correct diagnosis and treatment, as well as to the acceptance and support of people with mental illness within the community.

### Background

Twenty percent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness during their lifetime. Although most mental illnesses begin during adolescence and young adulthood, people of all ages, cultures, educational and income levels experience mental illnesses.

In the course of a lifetime, most people experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, sadness, emotional distress or disconnection from things. These feelings are often short-term, normal reactions to difficult situations, such as the death of a loved one, loss of a job, romantic breakup or sudden change of circumstances. People learn to cope with these difficult feelings just as we learn to cope with other difficult situations.

However, mental illness, by definition, is quite different. It has a serious impact on a person's ability to function effectively over a long period of time. Depending on the illness, a person may have a serious disturbance in thinking, mood or behaviour. They may not be able to cope with the simplest aspects of everyday life and may need help in regaining balance in their lives.

Along with the profound costs to livelihood, the economic costs of mental illness are also enormous. In 1993, the cost of mental illness in Canada was estimated to be at least \$7.331 billion. Most people with mental illness can be helped through health professionals and community-based services while some may need hospitalization to stabilize their symptoms. Eighty-six percent of hospitalizations for mental illnesses take place in general hospitals. Mental illness accounts for about four percent of all hospital admissions.

### Types of Mental Illnesses

Mental illnesses take many forms, including:

- mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder, which affect how one feels
- schizophrenia, which affects how one perceives the world;
- anxiety disorders which affect how fearful one perceives places, events or situations to be;
- personality disorders, which affect how one sees oneself in relation to others; and
- eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, which influence how one feels about food and one's body image.

Although suicide is not itself considered a mental illness, it is often the result of some underlying mental illness. It accounts for two percent of all deaths,



but 24 percent of deaths among those aged 15 to 24, and 16 percent of deaths among those aged 25 to 44.

## Causes of Mental Illness

A complex interplay of many factors cause mental illness. Contributing factors include:

- genetics;
- biology;
- personality;
- socio-economic status; and
- life events.

## Symptoms of Mental Illness

Mental illnesses take the form of changes in thinking, mood or behaviour or some combination of all three. The person affected shows symptoms of significant distress and the inability to function as needed over an extended period of time. These symptoms can vary from mild to severe, depending on the type of mental illness, the individual, the family and the patient's environment.

## Health Effects of Mental Illness

Mental health is as important as physical health. In fact, the two are intertwined. Our mental health directly affects our physical health and vice versa. People with physical health problems often experience anxiety or depression that affects their recovery. Likewise, mental health

factors can increase the risk of developing physical problems such as:

- diabetes;
- heart disease;
- weight gain or loss;
- gastrointestinal problems;
- reductions in immune system efficiency; and
- blood biochemical imbalances.

In the case of eating disorders, those affected may die from lack of nourishment.

## Treatment of Mental Disorders

Most mental illnesses can be effectively treated. Treatment methods may include one or more of the following:

- medication;
- scientifically based psychotherapies – such as cognitive therapy – which help patients learn to effectively change their thinking, feelings and behaviour;
- counselling;
- community support services; and
- education.

However, because of the stigma of mental illness, many people avoid or delay treatment.

If you or someone close to you shows signs of mental illness, it is important that you seek treatment as soon as possible. Talk to a regulated health professional

(e.g: family physician, psychologist, mental health nurse, social worker) or another trusted professional – such as a counselor or religious leader – about your concerns.

## Minimizing Your Risk And Helping In Recovery

Seeking help early, along with focusing on maintaining or improving your mental wellness – or 'positive mental health' – are the best ways to minimize your risk for mental illness.

Positive mental health can help you cope with life's challenges and enjoy life to the fullest. It can also help your recovery if you develop a mental illness.

The following suggestions can help you develop and maintain positive mental health.

- eat a well-balanced diet based on Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating;
- take part in physical activity regularly;
- get enough sleep each night;
- avoid overuse of alcohol, such as binge drinking or drinking to cope with problems;
- avoid the use of illegal drugs;
- learn to deal with the stresses of modern life and take steps to minimize the stress in your life; and
- talk to others – your family, friends, colleagues – about things that concern you. Sharing feelings and anxieties can help you cope with them.



## Government of Canada's Role

The Government of Canada has an important role to play in helping Canadians maintain and improve their mental health and cope with mental illness and addiction. Within its jurisdiction, the Government of Canada works to strengthen public health capacity in mental health and mental illness; set in place public health infrastructure to support mental health issues; provide knowledge generation and development; strengthen the capacity of the primary health care, home care and acute care sectors to effectively deliver mental health programs and services; provide leadership and governance; and develop social marketing campaigns.

The federal government also delivers primary and supplementary mental health services and addiction treatment to approximately one million Canadians, including:

Status Indians and Inuit living "on reserve;" the military; veterans; civil aviation personnel; the RCMP; inmates in federal penitentiaries; arriving immigrants; and federal public servants.

The Mental Health Promotion Unit (MHPU) of the Public Health Agency of Canada was created in 1995 to maintain and improve positive mental health and well-being for the Canadian population. The mandate of MHPU is to:

- promote and support mental health;
- reduce the burden of mental health problems and disorders

by contributing to the development, synthesis, dissemination and application of knowledge;

- develop, implement and evaluate policies, programs and activities designed to promote mental health; and
- address the needs of people with mental health problems or disorders.

The MHPU conducts policy analysis, development and research. It works on community mobilization and capacity building and partners with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations and international organizations. The Unit also promotes activities in mental health systems reform.

The Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control in the Public Health Agency of Canada conducts surveillance on mental illness to guide decisions and programs, policies and services.

## Need More Info?

For more information on mental health, go to:

The Mental Health Promotion Unit, Public Health Agency of Canada at:  
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/mentalhealth/mhp/index.html>

Health Canada's Mental Health section at:  
[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/mental/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/mental/index_e.html)

The Canadian Health Network at:  
<http://www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca> and click on "Mental Health"

The Canadian Mental Health Association at:  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

Or contact the local Canadian Mental Health Association in your community, listed in the phone book

The National Network for Mental Health at:  
[www.nnmh.ca](http://www.nnmh.ca)

The Canadian Psychological Association at:  
[www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca)

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada at:  
<http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/>

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada at:  
<http://www.schizophrenia.ca/>

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:  
[www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh)  
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245\*