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## Mental Illness

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### What is Mental Illness?

Mental Illness is a term that refers to a whole group of illnesses that can be very different from each other. At any one time as many as 1 in 5 New Zealanders may be experiencing mental health problems. It can affect how a person thinks, talks, feels and behaviours towards themselves and others.

Like physical illness, mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. It can affect anyone at any time, regardless of age, culture, income, gender, abilities or experiences. Even so, people often need support and encouragement to overcome the fear, isolation and stigma associated with mental illness.

There is no single specific cause of mental illness and no one is too blame for mental illness. It occurs because of many factors working together, including genetic inheritance, life stresses, biochemical imbalance and alcohol or drug abuse.

*Mental illnesses can be classified into two broad groups:*

**Neuroses** (or neurotic disorders) seem to be an exaggeration or distortion of common feelings, thoughts or behaviours (like fear or sadness). Neuroses include anxiety, phobia, obsession and neurotic depression.

**Psychoses** (or psychotic disorders), people are usually in some way out of touch with the real world. For example, they may have delusions (like people plotting against them), and react inappropriately. Psychoses include schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness and psychotic depression.

### Early warning signs

- Marked change in personality
- Confused thinking or speech
- Sudden, uncharacteristic preoccupation with particular issues such as death or religion
- Hearing voices or sounds that others don't hear
- Strong adherence to false beliefs
- Spending money in an unusually lavish manner
- Disrupted or changed sleeping patterns
- Deterioration of school or work performance
- Anxiety, fear or panic

### Treatment

Treatment varies depending on the nature of the illness. Common treatments are: psychotherapy, medication, behaviour management and social management.

The newest approach to mental health care means that a person's family or support network is included in care and treatment. This helps the person recover more quickly and avoid relapse or repeated hospitalisation.

Many people experience only one episode of mental illness in their lives and afterwards suffer no lasting ill-effects. Others may have episodes recurring at intervals throughout their lives.

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### Common Types of Mental Illness

#### Depression

Depression is the most common mental illness, affecting 1 in 7 New Zealanders at some stage. Everybody feels down from time to time, but depression is a mood disorder that may be felt as a profound sadness and/or loss of pleasure and enjoyment in most activities.

Some of the symptoms experienced are loss of energy or fatigue; persistent feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and guilt; changes in appetite; sleep disturbances; loss of interest in activities once enjoyed; physical symptoms; inability to concentrate and thoughts of death.

Sometimes depression will last only a few weeks, but in other cases it may continue for months or years. It can be treated with anti-depressants but these may take a few weeks to work.

## **Depression Support Network**

Depression Support Network provides personal support, education, access to resource information, speakers and social events. There is a support group for youth aged between 13-20 years.

They provide for cultural and generational diversity and provide empathy, acceptance and understanding.

For more information phone 03 366 8083

## **Anxiety Disorders**

There are a number of anxiety disorders, but all have in common an irrational sense of fear and worry, and uncomfortable physical sensations that affect all systems in the body.

The main types of anxiety disorders include general anxiety, simple and social phobia, post-traumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, panic disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder

*Anxiety is the interest  
paid on trouble before it  
is due.*

Symptoms may include a sense of worry or impending doom, irritability, palpitations, breathlessness, dizziness, sweating, an overwhelming sense of panic, sleep disturbances and changed perceptions. Because of the strong physical component, many people often seek help for what they believe is a physical illness.

Anxiety disorders can be cured. A combination of psychological and behavioural therapy, systematic desensitisation and exposure therapy is used to treat anxiety and phobias.

## **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is based around obsessive thoughts, for example fear of contamination, as well as a compulsion to carry out physical rituals such as excessive washing. The ritual behaviour often helps to relieve the obsessive thoughts.

Some of the common behaviours include cleaning, repeating, checking, being meticulously tidy, hoarding and avoiding.

People with OCD are usually aware that their obsessive thoughts are irrational but feel powerless to control them.

The compulsions such as excessive hand washing are time consuming and can interfere with all aspects

of your life, your daily routine, work and relationships with others but if the compulsion is not performed that creates great anxiety.

There is a risk of becoming depressed if OCD is not treated. It can be treated through relaxation techniques, counselling or medication.

## **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Support Group**

The OCD Support Group meets on the first Wednesday of each month. A specialist is available for consultation before each meeting. The group provides an opportunity to share common ground, information and support. It also provides the chance to learn about OCD and other valuable topics through guest speakers.

For more information phone 03 366 0560

## **Bipolar Disorder/Manic Depression**

Bipolar Disorder/Manic Depression is a disorder that causes fluctuations in mood. Some people experience both elevated and depressed moods, others only experience the highs. For some people, moods swing to extremes regularly, for others the highs and lows may be very occasional with years of wellness in between. Episodes can range from mild to severe.

The typical features of mania include feelings of euphoria, over-activeness, a reduced need for sleep, rapid speech and thought, irritability, lack of inhibitions and a tendency to do things out of character, such as spending large amounts of money.

The typical features of depression are an abnormally low mood, feelings of worthlessness and negative thoughts.

The treatment for Bipolar Disorder is usually with medication. Lithium carbonate is used to control the mania episodes and anti-depressants are used to control any depression. Counselling and psychotherapy can also help.

## **The Bipolar/Manic Depressive Society**

The Society seeks to help people whose lives are affected by providing information, education, support and a focus for inquiries about the disorder. They run support groups for families and carers and courses for anyone wanting a greater understanding of Bipolar Disorder/Manic Depression.

For more information phone 03 366 5815

## **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia is a severe disturbance of the brain's functioning. It distorts a person's thoughts, perceptions, moods and behaviour. People with Schizophrenia may experience delusions,

hallucinations, frenetic activity, paranoia, mood fluctuations, loss of drive and social withdrawal. It is thought that Schizophrenia results from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. It may affect anyone at any age.

If a person is experiencing psychotic symptoms, the voices they hear or the images they see are very real to them. Reasoning or arguing will not make them go away. Instead, stay calm and acknowledge how the person is feeling.

The treatment for Schizophrenia includes a number of different approaches, early identification, appropriate anti-psychotic medication, education, counselling and support. Medication is the most effective way of controlling Schizophrenia. New medications have fewer side effects than the old ones.

### **The Schizophrenia Fellowship**

The Schizophrenia Fellowship provides information on Schizophrenia and related disorders, support for individuals, families and whanau. Members join together for support and education and share strategies for supporting themselves. They also provide advocacy, educational resources, newsletters and research updates.

For more information phone either the national office in Christchurch 03 366 1909 or the Christchurch branch 03 365 6871

### **How to Best Care for a Person with Mental Illness**

*There are no magic answers when caring for someone who has a mental illness but the following hints may help:*

- Avoid blaming yourself for the mental illness and understand that it is not unusual for a carer to feel fear, anger, guilt, bewilderment, despair, grief, sadness and even shame.
- Get as much information as you can about the condition; its cause, its course, its outcome.
- Seek professional help and training to help you develop techniques to manage difficult behaviour.
- Set reasonable, realistic expectations of your caree's capabilities at the time, as to what can be achieved and how long it may take and encourage your caree to do the same.
- Create a pleasant, tolerant, positive climate by providing privacy, a slower pace, low sensory stimulus and a warm acceptance of your caree's lifestyle
- Encourage a level of activity that is realistic.
- Allow your caree to take on as much responsibility as they feel comfortable with.
- Make an effort to share time fairly between the person with the mental illness and other members of the family.

- Show respect and encouragement for your caree as they struggle with adversity and support their efforts to re-enter society.
- Join a support group of other carers as sharing your thoughts and feelings is helpful and enlightening for many.

### **Practical Suggestions for Coping with Mental Illness**

- Within the family, try to reduce the level of stress. While stress does not cause disorders it can make symptoms worse.
- Try to maintain peace and calm at home.
- Sometimes the illness makes a person excessively sensitive to noise levels. Speak quietly slowly and clearly to avoid confusion and irritation.
- Maintain and establish friendships, activities and hobbies, especially those that take you outside the home.
- Take care of yourself with nutritious food, exercise and rest in order to withstand the stress.
- Use respite care services to give yourself regular breaks.
- Strange behaviour is symptomatic of the disorder. Don't take it personally.

### **Where to go for Support**

#### **Caring for Carers**

All too often the burden of caring for a person with mental illness falls on one or two of the immediate family members and the emotional, physical and financial hardships involved can be difficult to cope with. Carers can get discouraged and lonely, angry and depressed. Someone they have loved has changed as a person. The whole relationship changes and new demands are placed upon the carer.

Many mental illnesses have their own support groups. *Caring for Carers* exists to provide support for anyone that is in a caring capacity. As a carer, it is important to remember that you are an individual with needs of your own. Ensure that you take care of yourself by arranging your day so that you have some time for yourself. Meeting with other carers can also ease the loneliness that carers can often experience.

*Caring for Carers* has a Newsletter and several support meetings each month and ongoing telephone support. These services are provided to help make your job easier.

*Caring for Carers* is situated:

4<sup>th</sup> floor, Securities House  
221 Gloucester Street, Christchurch.  
Postal address: P O Box 13 167, Christchurch  
Phone: 377 8426  
Fax: 377 8420  
Email: [caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz](mailto:caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz)

**Mental Health Foundation**

For more information phone 03 366 6936

**Psychiatric Consumers Trust**

For more information phone 03 366 8288

**Supporting Families in Mental Illness**

For more information phone 03 366 1909

**Depression Support Network**

For more information phone 03 366 8083

**Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Support Group**

For more information phone 03 366 0560

**Bipolar/Manic Depressive Society**

For more information phone 03 366 5815

**Schizophrenia Fellowship**

For more information phone 03 365 6871

**Agoraphobic Support Group**

For more information phone 03 374 9893

**Social Phobia Support Group**

For more information phone 03 377 9665

**Te Kakakura Trust**

For more information phone 03 379 7200