

## What is mental illness?

For many years mental illness has been considered as shameful, dangerous, unpleasant, embarrassing, weak, incurable and above all, something that had to be hidden away. This sort of attitude has caused misery to many people, almost as much misery to the people concerned as the illness itself.

Many of us will have had a friend, work colleague, neighbour or family member who has suffered a nervous breakdown or mental illness. We may feel uncomfortable or even frightened of these people - what should we say to them and is it safe to ask them how they are feeling? Is this discomfort or fear that we feel, caused by our ignorance or by the mental illness?

Mental illness is a disorder of the functioning of the mind. It is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses, just as heart disease refers to a group of illnesses that affect the functioning of the heart.

Professionals who work with the mentally ill classify the illnesses and some of the commonly used classifications are: neurosis, anxiety, phobia, obsession, neurotic depression, psychosis, psychotic depression and schizophrenia.

Neurosis or neurotic disorders seem to be an exaggeration or distortion of feelings, thoughts and behaviours that we all have. For instance, we have all at some time experienced deep or uncontrollable feelings of depression, sadness, tension or fear when parts of our life have become too difficult to handle. With some people these feelings become so disturbing for them that they are unable to cope with day-to-day activities like going to work, dealing with household duties, relating to others or even enjoying their leisure time.

In psychotic disorders, the person usually becomes in some way out of touch with the real world. The person may develop delusions - false ideas of persecution, guilt or grandeur. Or they may have hallucinations and this can appear strange and disturbing to others.

**It is important for us to realise that people who have a mental illness suffer very much.**

Intellectual disability or developmental disability is not the same as mental illness. People with intellectual or developmental disability have learning difficulties and develop at a slower rate. The condition is usually identified during early childhood. It can also result from damage to the brain and can occur at any age. Mental illness on the other hand can affect anyone of any level of intelligence. A person with an intellectual or developmental disability can also develop mental illness.

Mental illness has many causes and many factors interact and influence one another to cause mental illness. Some of these factors are our genetic inheritance, our family environment and cultural background, life stresses and events and even physical illness. However, it is important to remember what is stressful to one person may not be to another.

Certain types of mental illness such as schizophrenia and manic-depressive illnesses tend to be more common in some families than in others and are probably influenced by the genes (heredity). But it should be stressed that even then, the majority of relatives will not develop the illnesses. What is inherited, is a predisposition to develop the illness, and other factors are still necessary for the illness to appear.

**It is important for us to realise that people who have a mental illness suffer very much.**

### **Is Mental Illness catching?**

Mental illness is not an infectious germ that can be caught like measles and mumps.

### **Are Mentally Ill people violent?**

Unfortunately, there is still an image that all mentally ill people are violent, raving, dangerous lunatics and need to be locked up. The truth is that mentally ill people are no more dangerous or violent than the rest of the community. Most of the mentally ill are very vulnerable and afraid.

### **Are Mentally Ill people sexually disturbed?**

Most sexual offenders are not mentally ill. The vast majority of mentally ill people never commit sexual offences; in many instances the illness reduces their interest in sex.

### **Why don't Mentally Ill people just pull themselves together?**

Most people suffering from a mental illness would love to do just this. Unfortunately will power alone cannot cure mental illness, just in the same way it cannot cure a broken leg.

### **Shouldn't we lock up the Mentally Ill for their own good?**

Most people suffering with a mental illness never need to be admitted into hospital and can be successfully treated in their own homes. It is only when a person becomes so disabled by their symptoms and cannot cope that they may need the sheltered environment of a hospital and most wards of psychiatric hospitals are not locked. Only a small percentage of mentally ill people need to be locked in a hospital for their own or society's protection.

### **Is Schizophrenia the same as 'split personality'?**

No! Schizophrenia is a psychosis, where a person's feelings, thoughts and behaviours become very disorganised and do not fit together. Some sufferers have delusions, ideas and hear voices and various combinations of symptoms may appear in any one person.

### **What is Manic-Depressive Illness?**

This is a psychosis that is mainly characterised by disturbances of the mood of the sufferer. During the manic phase of the illness the person may be more happy than their circumstances would warrant, overactive, over talkative and over-confident. They may even feel that they have super abilities and may overspend dramatically. These feelings are often associated with irritability.

During the depressive phase, the person may become sad, pessimistic about the future, withdrawn and under-active, sometimes with strong feelings of guilt. In either phase the person may experience hallucinations and/or delusions.

Episodes of this illness may be mild or severe and last for short or lengthy periods. In between episodes the person may be symptom free.

### **Can Mental Illness be cured?**

Many people have one episode of mental illness and then never break down again, but there are a small percentage of people who have recurrent episodes. There is an even smaller percentage of people who have mental illness all their lives. Even people who have had a mental illness for years have recovered. It should be remembered that you can have relapses in physical illnesses and mental illness is no different.

## **What treatments are used for Mental Illness?**

**Psychotherapy:** There are many forms of 'talking treatment', but basically they all try to help sufferers by talking with them and relating to them in a special way so that they can understand themselves better.

**Behaviour Therapy:** The therapist is concerned in helping people alter their behaviour or thinking in order to reduce their symptoms.

**Medication:** Some medications, like 'major tranquillisers and anti-depressants' reduce or remove the symptoms of psychosis. Other medications can help relieve tension and depression and therefore make it easier for the person to deal with their symptoms. Medication should always be taken under the direction of a doctor. It is usually given at night since drowsiness may occur as a side effect in the early stages, and this can be put to good use by being slept off as difficulty in sleeping is often part of the illness.

**Electro-convulsive therapy?** This is used only occasionally, mostly for very severe depressions, where doctors believe it can make a dramatic improvement in a person whose symptoms are intolerable. A general anaesthetic is always given before this form of treatment is given.

**Alternative therapies:** Some people find alternative therapies helpful in the treatment of mental illness. These alternative therapies can be anything from nutritional, orthomolecular medicine, movement therapies, relaxation and meditation. Though these treatments have not all been thoroughly validated some people find them of considerable benefit.

There are also a wide range of social and physical activities that can be used to teach and to encourage people suffering from a mental illness to express and enjoy life, and to learn coping skills. It is here that community and church groups can play an important part in restoring the self-esteem of someone who has been mentally ill. They can also offer support for relatives and friends of the mentally ill person.

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## What is Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness occurring mainly in young adults. Schizophrenia happens to people from all walks of life but most commonly its onset occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 years. However, having said this schizophrenia can occur in older people as well. The symptoms of schizophrenia can include

### **Disordered thinking-**

When acutely ill, people with schizophrenia make unusual, illogical associations in their thinking. They lose the capacity for abstract thought. Words can become jumbled, strange and incoherent. The flow of thoughts is often blocked and conversation no longer makes sense.

### **Delusions-**

These are immovable, rigid beliefs held by the person about being controlled or harmed in some way. They feel that thoughts are being unwantedly inserted into or withdrawn from their minds, that others can 'hear' their thoughts or that the T.V. or radio is sending them special messages.

### **Hallucinations-**

These are illusory sensations, where people with schizophrenia hear voices that no-one else hears. Thoughts are spoken aloud by other voices, conversing with the individual about themselves, telling them what is happening, describing their situation in bizarre and warped contexts. The voices can be so persuasive that people often act in wildly inappropriate ways as the voices incite them, sometimes with serious consequences.

### **Inappropriate Emotional Expression-**

Emotions may be dull, flat, or out of control and over excited. They may be inappropriate, like laughing at something sad, or crying at something amusing.

### **Social withdrawal-**

People with schizophrenia retreat into their own world, avoiding company and spending hours alone, often in their bedroom.

### **Severe loss of motivation-**

People with schizophrenia lose initiative and energy to a marked degree. They can become unconcerned about personal hygiene or appearance.

### **Denial-**

People with schizophrenia may not accept that they are ill. They may refuse to seek professional help, refuse prescribed medication or remain completely untreated, causing serious problems for their relatives and other carers.

Most people with schizophrenia do not have all of these symptoms, and some are more severely affected by them than others. At their worst, the symptoms may make it very difficult for the person to lead a normal life. They can make the world a confusing and often frightening place.

### **Causes of Schizophrenia:**

The cause of schizophrenia is not known. It is considered, however, to be not one, but a group of diseases of the brain, characterised by disordered perception, thinking and feeling. Research is concerned with possible contributing factors, such as genetic or biochemical defects, slow acting viral infections, as well as environmental influences. There have been a number of studies linking the onset of

schizophrenia with substance abuse. Marijuana usage has been particularly noted as a relevant factor, It is not proven whether Marijuana is a cause of schizophrenia, a contributing factor in an individual who has a predisposition to the illness, or whether drug usage is sometimes used by sufferers to escape the trauma of undiagnosed schizophrenic experiences.

### **Management of Schizophrenia:**

#### **Medication:**

Medication is the most effective method of controlling hallucinations, delusions and thought disorders. Some people recover, but more often they continue to have trouble with the symptoms throughout their life. It may be necessary to stay on medication for extended periods, perhaps forever. Some of the drugs have very difficult side effects and can cause dry mouth, weight gain, impotence and nausea. For this reason, as well as for the reason that once people start to feel well they may believe they no longer need medication, relapses due to failure to take medication are a common occurrence. Some people simply refuse to take medication.

#### **Learning to live with the Illness:**

As a result of schizophrenia adjustments have to be made. Ways of coping can be developed by:

- Gaining information about schizophrenia
- Getting help with interpersonal difficulties
- Encouraging the development of self help training, advice about nutrition, hygiene, budgeting and homemaking
- Developing recreational pursuits
- Assessing educational levels and training for a vocation

#### **Community Services:**

Today, the emphasis is primarily on treating people with mental illnesses whilst they remain living within the community, with brief periods in hospital prescribed only if necessary.

Often families of people with schizophrenia are the major sources of patient care. For this reason, the families of people with schizophrenia also need support. Being the parent or close family of a person living with schizophrenia is a heart breaking and difficult task requiring extraordinary patience. Not only does the illness mean that family are never sure what the next moment will bring but often, there is the added difficulty of coping with social ostracism and lack of understanding.

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