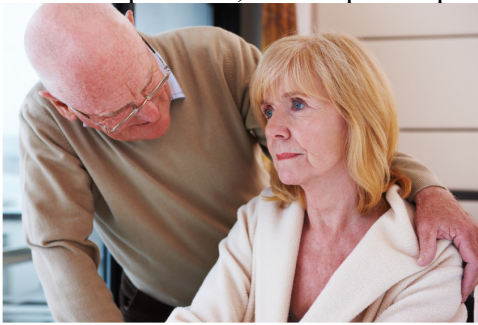


Recognizing and responding to signs of mental illness

It can be hard to know whether someone's behaviour is a result of a difficult emotional phase, or a signal of mental illness. Short-lived feelings of isolation, sadness, loneliness or distress are all part and parcel of the human experience, and help us cope and move on from life's more traumatic experiences. But when these emotions remain unchanged over time and start to interfere with day-to-day tasks and overall well-being, they could be signs of mental illness.



Warning signs

Spotting the signs and accepting that you or a loved one is suffering from a mental illness can be incredibly difficult. Common signs of distress can include:

- Unprovoked emotional outbursts;
- Obvious personality changes;
- Problems coping with daily activities and challenges;
- Loss or interest in activities and social withdrawal;
- Difficulty making decisions, concentrating or remembering things;
- Major changes in sleeping and eating patterns;
- Extreme anxiety;
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol;
- False beliefs, delusions or hallucinations.

If you spot these signs in yourself or a loved one, don't ignore them. Turning a blind eye to a mental health concern could deprive someone you care about of timely and needed care and support.

Reaching out

You've noticed something is wrong, but are uneasy and unsure of how to talk about it. Remember, early intervention speeds the recovery process. Here are some ideas that may help in approaching this delicate subject:

- **Show concern.** Your loved one may feel shame, guilt, fear or confusion. Pick a calm, quiet time to broach the topic and gently express your concern. "I'm worried about you and want to help," or, "I've noticed that you seem anxious, are you alright?" are possible ways to start the conversation. **Actively listen** to any response without interrupting or making any judgmental comments. Letting loved ones know you've got their best interest at heart creates a more caring and secure environment.
- **Suggest resources.** Providing relevant information can ease anxiety over finding support services. Investigate resources or services in the area that may be able to help, including their family doctor or Employee and Family Assistance Program, which will ensure confidentiality. Advocate groups and government initiatives have helped reduce the stigma of mental illness, and there is now more research, information, accessible hotlines and assistance programs than ever before. Websites and online information can present a non-threatening way of encouraging a loved one to explore mental health support options when they're ready to do so.
- **Offer help.** While you may not have the expertise to directly help others cope with mental health issues, your emotional and physical presence can be invaluable. From drives to the doctor, to a shoulder to cry on, to making a favourite meal—the little things you do to support your loved one can have a great impact.

Talking about mental health concerns with someone you suspect may be at risk can be difficult, but there are more resources available and greater public understanding today than ever before. It's up to all of us to actively play a role in reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. Take the time to stop and think

about your own attitude and behaviour in relation to mental illness, and encourage others to do the same. Tread carefully, offer information and support, and let the person know that you're there to help, not judge.