Living with mental illness



Thanks to dramatic changes in attitude over the past 20 years, more and more people are realizing that mental illnesses are just that – illnesses. Since there are more than 200 different mental disorders and varying degrees of severity, accurate diagnosis and specific treatment are essential. Today many treatment options are available, including medication, therapy, counselling, lifestyle changes, peer-on-peer support and in some cases, community and social services. So why are many people either unaware that their symptoms may be the result of a mental condition or avoiding seeking help?

Barriers to recovery

Despite extensive public education programs, new medications, growing resources, progressive mental health legislation and more open and frank discussions, misconceptions continue. Some of these include:

- Mental illnesses aren't real illnesses.
- People with mental health problems can snap out of it if they try hard enough.
- People with a mental illness are weak and can't handle stress.
- Mental illness is an excuse for bad behaviour.
- People with mental illnesses are unpredictable, even violent and dangerous.
- People don't recover from mental illnesses.

The good news is that millions of people with mental illness do reach out for help and support and thrive in their careers, have rewarding relationships, raise happy children and are active and respected members of their communities. The first step is an accurate diagnosis.

After a diagnosis

While the news that you have any medical condition may cause a wide range of emotions, including shock, denial, fear, guilt and sadness, you have an important role to play in your recovery. For example:

- **Learn as much as possible about your condition**. The more informed you are about your illness and treatment options, the greater role you'll be able to play in your recovery. There are many excellent online sites as well as resources through government and community agencies.
- **Stick to your treatment plan**. Even if you're feeling better, don't stop taking any prescribed medications. If you stop, symptoms may come back. Talk to your doctor before making any changes.
- **Create a strong support system.** Talk to trusted family members and friends and seek help from others living with mental illness through support groups or online communities. Support groups are safe places to share your experiences, learn from others and connect with people who understand what you're going through. You can find support groups through members of your support team and through community health organizations.

- **Stay connected.** You may not feel like socializing but it's important to stay in touch with relatives and friends. Social isolation is a major risk factor for the development of depression and even some types of addiction.
- **Exercise**. Regular physical activity is not only essential for good physical health but good mental health as well. Physical activity helps increase the production of endorphins − our body's feel-good chemicals, helping to shed the day's stresses, elevate your mood and remain calm. Exercise can also help you sleep better. Even light activity such as walking or gardening can make a difference.
- **Find healthy ways to deal with stress.** This can include breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or even a relaxing bath.
- **Eat well.** Both your physical and mental health is affected by your diet**.** No matter how tired, frustrated and upset you are, try not to rely on, or take solace in, fast foods, highly processed meals or sugary, fatty treats. Instead, continue to eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, lean meats and whole grains.
- **Avoid alcohol and drug use.** Using alcohol or recreational drugs can make it difficult to treat a mental illness. If you can't quit on your own, see your doctor or find a support group to help you.
- **Set reasonable goals.** If you're feeling overwhelmed, give yourself permission to do less. You may find it helpful to make a list of daily tasks or use a planner to structure your time and stay organized.
- **Practice positivity.** Focus on what is great about your life, not your illness or things that are causing you stress. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down what they are thankful for every day, including their own talents and abilities.

Finally, remember that you have a treatable medical disorder and that there are many people ready to support you. Mental illness does not have to stop you from living your life. If you're seeking more information, are looking for resources in your area or want help, contact your confidential Employee and Family Assistance Program.