Discovering mental illness



When we feel unwell or when we are experiencing worrying physical symptoms, we seek medical help. We know that without prompt and effective treatment we'll feel worse or even compromise our long-term health. However, we're less likely to seek help for our minds. We may be reluctant because of the continued stereotypes and stigma about mental illness or because we don't recognize the signals our bodies are sending. This is concerning because any untreated condition – physical or mental – can have devastating effects on our quality of life.

What is mental illness?

Mental illness is characterized by changes in behaviour, thinking or mood (or a combination of the three) and is associated with substantial distress and general dysfunction over an extended period of time.

There are more than 200 types of mental illnesses, the most prevalent are:

- Mood disorders (major depression and bipolar disorder).
- Anxiety disorders (panic attacks, phobias and obsessive compulsive disorder).
- Personality disorders.
- Eating disorders.
- Problem gambling.
- Substance dependency.
- Schizophrenia.

Every mental illness has its own characteristic symptoms. However, there are some general warning signs that indicate you may need professional help. Some of these include:

- Prolonged feelings of sadness, worthlessness and hopelessness.
- Apathy and/or withdrawal from social activities.
- Problems with thinking clearly, concentration, memory, deterioration in job or academic performance.
- Excessive fear, worry or anxiety.
- Extreme mood swings.
- Excessive anger or hostility.
- Change in personality.
- Inability to cope with daily problems and activities.
- Obsessive thoughts, fears or compulsive behaviours (washing hands, hoarding, rituals, organizing, etc).
- Dramatic changes in eating habits or sleeping patterns.
- Delusions, grandiose ideas or hallucinations.
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs.
- Self-harm.
- Thoughts of suicide or attempted suicide.

It’s normal to feel angry, anxious, sad or overwhelmed when you’re having a bad day or going through a difficult time. What may indicate an underlying mental illness is when some or all of these symptoms intensify or do not go away over a period of time.

Now what?

You feel you may be suffering from anxiety, depression or another mental illness. What do you do? The first step is remembering that mental illnesses are just that – illnesses. The second is knowing that you are not alone. One in four people worldwide will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. In fact, the World Health Organization has stated that depression is the fourth leading cause of disability and premature death across the globe.

The third and most important step is to seek professional help. Depending on the type and severity of your illness, treatment can include medication, psychotherapy, lifestyle changes, and support from family, the workplace and community. It’s important to be honest when describing your symptoms because your family doctor or mental health professional needs as much information as possible to make an accurate diagnosis and create an effective care plan. Please know: you did not cause your illness. There are many factors that can have a profound impact on mental health, including:

- **Family history.** Research is showing that several mental illnesses, including major depression and schizophrenia have a strong genetic component.
- **Stressful events.** Trauma, grief, job loss, divorce, childbirth, natural disasters or conflict can affect your mental well-being.
- **Stressful life situations.** Poverty (low income, unsafe neighbourhoods, inadequate housing, lack of amenities and social networks, and even basic human rights) certainly have an impact on both physical and mental well-being. People in certain professions – military personnel, first responders – are also more likely to experience mental health issues, especially Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- **Physical health problems.** Depression is common among people who have chronic illnesses such as cancer, arthritis, diabetes and heart disease. Half of all chronic pain sufferers experience severe levels of depression.
- **Lifestyle.** Unhealthy coping behaviours like overeating, smoking or the abuse of alcohol or drugs can not only mask an underlying mental issue, but worsen mental health and thus begin a downward spiral.

After the diagnosis

When you’re diagnosed with any health problem, particularly a long-term or chronic one, it’s normal to feel many emotions ranging from shock, denial, fear, confusion and anger to relief and hope. If you’re having a hard time coping with your diagnosis, you may want to consider talking to a therapist or trusted friend of family member. There are also many online support groups available. Mental health organizations and your Employee and Family Assistance Program can provide a wide variety of information, support and resources.

Finally, be kind to yourself. Everyone`s experience is different and it may take time to find what works best for your recovery or long-term management. The good news is that with the right treatment and support, life not only goes on – it gets better.