

# Understanding Mental Illness

We hear so much about mental illness these days, but what exactly is mental illness?

## **Mental illness is a real health condition that affects:**

- how we think,
- how we feel, and
- how we act.

## **Some important information:**

- Mental illness can affect how we function at school, at work, and at home.
- Mental illness is not contagious; that is, you cannot “catch it” from another person.
- Mental illness is never a person’s fault, it is something that happens to them and that they have to manage.
- One out of five people will experience a mental illness in his or her lifetime.
- 100% of Canadians will be impacted by mental illness - whether diagnosed themselves or having a family member, friend or co-worker diagnosed.

## **How does one “get” mental illness, then?**

Mental illness can occur as a combination of your genetics and environment.

- Genetics are characteristics that are passed down through a family’s generations and an environment consists of life’s circumstances and surroundings. In other words, anyone could get a mental illness if you have the genetics for it and the right environment. The combination of genetics and environment for each person is entirely individual.

## **Are mental illnesses treatable?**

Mental illnesses are treatable. They are typically treated with medication, therapy, or a combination of both. It really is specific to the individual to figure out what works.

## **Can people have more than one mental illness?**

Yes. People can have more than one mental illness; in fact, you can have two or three or even more at the same time.

Names of some mental illnesses:

- Major Depressive Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Bipolar Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

***These names might seem intimidating, but in fact they are simply names for clusters of symptoms that affect your thinking, feeling, and resulting behavior.***

**Quick “how-to” on getting your child diagnosed with a mental illness:**

1. Conversation with your child about your concerns - loads of open communication.
2. Appointment with your General Practitioner with your child.
3. Referral to a paediatric psychiatrist and a clinical counselor or psychologist who works with young people.

**Did you know?**

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in medications for mental illness, whereas a psychologist or counselor never prescribes medications but instead focuses on therapy. Your child may see a counselor or psychologist once a week or every other week, but if you see a psychiatrist it is typically less often and will be in conjunction with a psychiatrist.

**Time to breathe.**

Mental illnesses can make life more challenging, this is true.

However, with the appropriate medication, therapy, or both; your child can live a wonderful and fruitful life. Most importantly, if your child has a mental illness, it is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with them - they simply have a mental illness and like any other illness, you can get treatment, help and support.