

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.**