

## **Mental Health Problems**

**Introduction to mental health:** Mental health is about how we think, feel and behave. Mental health problems can range from very simple, everyday-type problems that are experienced by all of us and can be helped by talking to a counsellor or psychotherapist, to more complicated mental health problems which may require medical attention. Mental health problems can affect people at any time of life and in different ways.

One in four people in the UK have a mental health problem at some point in their lives that affects their daily life, relationships or physical health.

A mental illness is a condition that can cause mild to severe disturbances in thoughts, feelings and/or behaviour, resulting in difficulties with coping with life's ordinary demands and routines.

Without care and treatment, mental health problems can have a serious affect on the individual and those around them. Often the problem may be quite simple and be the result of difficult life events which inevitably affect us all. Possibly by attending a series of sessions with a counsellor/or therapist, where the problem can be talked through and understood, the individual can then find ways to deal with it and cope better. However, problems are often not attended to soon enough and can deteriorate, requiring more complex treatment later on and greater suffering for the individual and people close to them. Every year more than 250,000 people in the UK are admitted to psychiatric hospitals and over 4,000 people commit suicide.

As with cancer, diabetes and heart disease, mental illnesses are often physical as well as emotional and psychological.

**Causes of Mental health issues:** There is no single cause of mental health problems – the reasons why they develop are as complex as the individual. The Ethiopian community organisation meeting in 2004 has identified the following causes specifically for the Ethiopian community members in the UK: Mental illnesses may be caused by a reaction to environmental stresses such as political and social events, war, hunger, poverty, violence, leaving the homeland, being a refugee in a foreign country, death, loss, difficulties with family members – parents, siblings, children, relatives, joblessness etc. Some problems could be genetic or due to biochemical imbalances. With proper care and treatment many individuals learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional difficulties.

Problems which have emerged with some regularity in the Ethiopian community include:

- Drug, and alcohol misuse
- Immigration issues
- Gambling
- Homesickness
- Chat
- Problems within the family? Domestic violence?
- Bereavement
- Anxiety
- Racism
- Loneliness
- Homelessness

People who are faced with adverse living conditions are often more vulnerable to developing emotional and mental health problems. Such individuals may be part of communities living in poverty, ethnic minority groups where people are isolated and have problems with language and racism. Discrimination is often the cause for emotional difficulties such as that experienced by disabled people and people of different ethnicity, religion, gender, age and sexuality. Sometimes people with mental health problems are discriminated against. We, ourselves, may often discriminate against people with mental health difficulties without realising it.

Drinking too much alcohol over a long period of time, and using illegal drugs can contribute to mental health problems, particularly in people who are already vulnerable.

**Types of mental health problems:** There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some are:

- **Depression:** A mood or emotional state that is marked by sadness, inactivity, and a reduced ability to enjoy life. Work, and life in general, becomes too much to handle and there is a difficulty to tackle daily problems which we would usually tackle with determination
- **Anxiety disorder:** The anxiety disorders discussed in this guide are:
  - **Stress:** Stress is a well-known trigger for depression and it can also affect your physical health. So it's important to identify the causes of stress in your life and try to minimise them. Any sort of loss, from bereavement, divorce and separation to a child leaving home, causes stress, as do long-term illness and disability. But things such as marriage, moving house, a new job and holidays have

quite high stress ratings too. In work, worrying about deadlines or about not being up to the challenges of a particular task can cause stress.

Some common signs of too much stress include:

- increased irritability
- heightened sensitivity to criticism
- signs of tension, such as nail-biting
- difficulty getting to sleep and early morning waking
- drinking and smoking more
- indigestion
- loss of concentration

**It's important to act to relieve damaging stress before it affects your physical or mental health**

- **Panic disorder:** People with panic disorder have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning. They can't predict when an attack will occur, and many develop intense anxiety between episodes, worrying when and where the next one will strike.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder:** Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition that can develop following a terrifying event. Often, people with PTSD have persistent frightening thoughts and memories of their ordeal and feel emotionally numb, especially with people they were once close to. This emerges when people have been subjected to violence and abuse of any form or have been involved in an accident or a man-made/physical disaster.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, involves anxious thoughts or rituals you feel you can't control. If you have OCD, you may be plagued by persistent, unwelcome thoughts or images, or by the urgent need to engage in certain rituals. You may be obsessed with germs or dirt, so you wash your hands over and over
- **social phobia (social anxiety disorder),**
- **Specific phobias:** specific phobia is an intense fear of something that poses little or no actual danger. Some of the more common specific phobias are centered around closed-in places, heights, escalators, tunnels, highway driving, water, flying, dogs, and injuries involving blood.

- **Personality disorder:** People with PD often have highly unstable patterns of social relationships. While they can develop intense but stormy attachments, their attitudes towards family, friends, and loved ones may suddenly shift from idealization (great admiration and love) to devaluation (intense anger and dislike).
- **Schizophrenia:** Symptoms may include hallucinations, delusions, blunted emotions, disordered thinking, and a withdrawal from reality. You may begin to think in an incoherent or different way and lose touch with reality.
- **Psychosis:** Symptoms can include hallucinations (**A false or mistaken idea; a delusion**) serious defects in judgment and insight, defects in the thinking process, and the inability to make objective decisions. It is characterised by a defective or loss of contact with reality.
- **Paranoia:** You may become obsessively suspicious of something without any logical reason. Paranoia can be present in the diagnosis of many mental health problems.
- **Dementia:** A persistent disorder of the mental process due to brain disease in later life or injury often occurring.
- **Bipolar disorder:** Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in a person's mood, energy, and ability to function. Different from the normal ups and downs that everyone goes through, the symptoms of bipolar disorder are severe.
- **Self-harm:** Self-harm is a way of dealing with very strong emotions. For some people it gives the relief that crying may provide for the rest of us. Some self-harming people feel so angry and aggressive they can't control their emotions. They become afraid that they may hurt someone, so they turn their aggression inwards to get relief. The most common forms are cutting the arms, hands and legs, and less commonly the face, abdomen, breasts and even genitals. Some people burn or scald themselves; others inflict blows on their bodies, or bang themselves against something. It's important to make a distinction between self-harm and attempted **suicide**, though people who self-mutilate often go on to attempt suicide (support is available from Samaritans).
- **Suicides:** It's important to distinguish between impulsive acts of self-harm and planned organised attempts to end your own life. In most suicides, the person has taken steps to ensure they aren't discovered until afterwards. While about one per

cent of deaths in the UK are because of suicide, this number is higher for people with:

- depression
- alcohol or drug problems
- schizophrenia
- personality disorders

Particular mental health problems are also more common in certain people

Support is available at a variety of counselling and psychotherapy services both in the NHS, and voluntary sector. The Samaritans are able to provide immediate support and advice on where to find further help.

**Coping mechanisms:** People with mental health problems need help and support to enable them to cope with their illness. There are many treatment options, including counselling, psychotherapy, complementary therapies, self help strategies and medication. It's important that people with mental illnesses are told about the options available so they can make a decision about what treatment suits them best.

- **Accept your feelings:** Despite the different symptoms and types of mental illnesses, many families who have a loved one with mental illness, share similar experiences. You may find yourself denying the warning signs, worrying what other people will think because of the stigma, or wondering what caused your loved one to become ill. Accept that these feelings are normal and common among families going through similar situations. Find out all you can about your loved one's illness by reading and talking with mental health professionals. Share what you have learned with others.
- **Handling unusual behavior:** The outward signs of a mental illness are often behavioural. Individuals may be extremely quiet or withdrawn. Conversely, he or she may burst into tears or have outbursts of anger. Even after treatment has started, individuals with a mental illness can exhibit anti-social behaviours. When in public, these behaviours can be disruptive and difficult to accept. The next time you and your family member visit your doctor or mental health professional, discuss these behaviours and develop a strategy for coping.
- **Establishing a support network:** Whenever possible, seek support from friends and family members. If you feel

you cannot discuss your situation with friends or other family members, find a self-help or support group. These groups provide an opportunity for you to talk to other people who are experiencing the same type of problems. They can listen and offer valuable advice.

- **Seeking counselling:** Therapy can be beneficial for both the individual with mental illness and other family members. Working together with a mental health professional you can work out a way in which you can better cope and better understand your loved one's illness. When looking for a therapist, be patient and talk to a few professionals so you can choose the person that is right for you and your family. It may take time until you are comfortable, but in the long run you will be glad you sought help.
- **Taking time out:** It is common for the person with the mental illness to become the focus of family life. When this happens, other members of the family may feel ignored or resentful. Some may find it difficult to pursue their own interests. If you are the caregiver, *you* need some time for yourself. Schedule time away *to prevent* becoming frustrated or angry. If you schedule time for yourself it will help you to keep things in perspective and you may have more patience and compassion for coping or helping your loved one. Only when you are physically and emotionally healthy can you help others.

*"Many families who have a loved one with mental illness share similar experiences"*

It is important to remember that there is hope for recovery and that with treatment many people with mental illness return to a productive and fulfilling life.

**Warning Signs and Symptoms:** To learn more about symptoms that are specific to a particular mental illness, refer to the NMHA brochure on that illness. The following are signs that your loved one may want to speak to a medical or mental health professional.

**In adults:**

- ◆ confused thinking
- ◆ prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
- feelings of extreme highs and lows
- excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- social withdrawal
- dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits

- strong feelings of anger
- delusions or hallucinations
- growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- suicidal thoughts
- denial of obvious problems
- numerous unexplained physical ailments
- substance abuse

### **In older children and pre-adolescents:**

- substance abuse
- inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- change in sleeping and/or eating habits
- excessive complaints of physical ailments
- defiance of authority, truancy, theft, and/or vandalism
- intense fear of weight gain
- prolonged negative mood, often accompanied by poor appetite or thoughts of death
- frequent outbursts of anger

### **In younger children:**

- changes in school performance
- poor grades despite strong efforts
- excessive worry or anxiety (i.e. refusing to go to bed or school)
- hyperactivity
- persistent nightmares
- persistent disobedience or aggression

Frequent temper tantrums

### **Feel-good factors**

- relaxation
- the ability to express your feelings
- aiming for achievable goals
- time for the things you enjoy
- a healthy diet
- a sport or exercise you enjoy
- work you find rewarding
- a comfortable balance between work and leisure
- time to yourself, to do the things that interest you
- time for friends and family