

# Mental Ill-health



**Everyone has bad days or tough weeks. However, if you, or someone in your life, experiences consistent struggles with their mental health, it might be a sign that something else is going on.**

**2 in 5 Australians experience mental illness in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> That suggests that at some point, you, or your family member, friend, colleague or neighbour might need support. Knowing how to respond to mental ill-health can be confusing and confronting, so it's important to seek information, advice and referrals rather than trying to manage it on your own.**

**This tip sheet will support you in understanding what mental ill-health is, recognising some signs that someone may be struggling and provide you with information on where to seek appropriate support.**

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary statistics on key mental health issues including the prevalence of mental disorders and the use of services, 2020-21. ABS: Canberra.

## Stigma and belonging

Stigma – the feeling of being judged as 'lacking' or 'a failure' because of mental ill health - can come from a lack of understanding. This can happen within families, schools, workplaces or communities. Understanding mental ill-health demystifies the conditions surrounding it and demonstrates that anyone, at any time, can experience these issues. In order to create belonging, we need to have the information to better understand mental ill-health and the tools to combat prejudice.

## Understanding mental ill-health

Mental ill-health is an umbrella term that includes mental illness. Mental illness is a group of diagnosed disorders that affect cognitive, emotional and social abilities. Mental ill-health also refers to other mental health problems that do not meet the criteria for a diagnosis but still have a significant effect on day to day functioning. Mental ill-health is complex, and we do not completely understand what causes it. However, we know that life stressors, biological and genetic factors, abuse, trauma and other influences can trigger mental ill-health.

Mental ill-health can also be challenging for those who have relationships with the person experiencing it. Bearing witness to someone experiencing mental ill-health can be extremely stressful and disempowering. Understanding where to seek support for your loved one and for yourself is important. We will share more on this later.

## Recognising

Mental ill-health affects someone's thoughts, perceptions, feelings and behaviours. This can make it difficult for the person to manage relationships, work and other commitments.

Symptoms of mental ill-health can be unexpected. Many imagine that mentally unwell people will be withdrawn, quiet or sad, but mental ill-health comes in many forms. Other, more unexpected symptoms include:

- Poor concentration or confusion
- Extreme mood changes, including euphoria
- Anger or irritability
- Lack of appetite, lack of interest in usual activities
- Changes to sleeping patterns
- Relationship struggles
- Lack of insight into their own behaviour
- Substance abuse

While each of these symptoms alone may not equate to mental ill-health, when considered together by a professional they can be indicative of something more serious. It is, however, important not to diagnose yourself or someone else. If you are worried, please consult with your GP.

## Responding

Mental ill-health can be very serious. The first step to getting treated is to book an appointment with your GP. Talking to a trusted family member or friend is also important, as they may be able

to help you seek professional support. Doing it alone is challenging - sharing the load can help you navigate the process and recover more quickly.

Responding to someone else's mental ill-health can pose challenges as well. The first step is to check in with yourself to see if you are ready for what could be a difficult conversation. There is no need to be fearful, however choosing a day when you feel up to it and making sure you are equipped with information about where the other person can seek help is important.

As a friend, neighbour, family member or colleague, you might be the first to notice that something is not going well, so don't feel dejected if the person struggling doesn't respond well the first time you raise your concerns. Remember that mental ill-health still has a stigma attached to it, and it is common to believe we are doing better than perhaps we are, or hope we are covering up any private worries. It might help to ask open-ended questions, or use prompts about their change in behaviour. For example, "How are you feeling at the moment" or "I notice you haven't been yourself lately, is everything okay?". Use our Unexpected Counsellor [link] for more ideas.

### Treatment

Mental ill-health is treated using social, psychological and complementary therapies, medications, lifestyle changes and hospital admission (for more serious cases). While professional teams will manage a large portion of this care, support networks at home help people recover more quickly and reduce the severity or frequency of relapse.

There are many emotional and physical ways to support someone. Some include:

- Asking them how they are doing – don't assume someone else has done so
- Helping them make an appointment with a professional or providing them with information to find one when they are ready
- Scheduling things to do together that are low effort
- Helping them connect with their support networks
- Supporting their daily routine e.g. cooking meals

Think about your relationship to them and assess how you can best support them, without judgement or taking over. Remember that people respond differently to support and sometimes the illness itself can affect how people receive the support. If you find them pushing back, have a conversation with them and try to establish support that suits you both.

Focus on supporting rather than rescuing. If you feel your own anxieties or worries about their health affecting your own, it's time to take a step back. You can only support someone else if you feel supported yourself. Understand that there is a limit to how much you can help someone. This might mean identifying someone else in their support network to step up while you take a break.

### Supporting someone at risk of suicide

If you are concerned about someone's immediate safety call 000 and stay with the person until an ambulance arrives, or take the person to a hospital Emergency department.

If it is not an emergency, call lifeline on 13 11 14 or call another family member, friend, or doctor for support.

### Managing mental ill-health

Mental health fluctuates throughout a person's lifetime. After treatment has been sought, there are lots of lifestyle approaches that help maintain mental health and wellbeing. In general, support from friends, family and the community, eating well, exercising and reducing your stress can all help. Relationships Australia has a variety of resources for maintaining mental health:

#### Tip Sheets

- [Managing stress and anxiety](#)
- [What is Loneliness](#)
- [Preventing and overcoming loneliness](#)
- Unexpected Counsellor

#### Videos

- [Worrying about work](#)
- [The importance of self-care](#)
- [Dealing with anxiety](#)

#### Training course

- [Connect for Mental Health](#) – Relationships Australia Western Australia has developed a learning tool to help you reach out to someone who may be at risk.

#### Other resources

Beyond Blue has a variety of [tip sheets for specific conditions](#). The Black Dog Institute is more research-focussed, they have a similar set of [condition-specific resources](#) which can help you learn about the condition, as well as locate support.

For a list of other support options, please see [here](#).

**For more information on our services and how they can support you, or to find your nearest centre:**

**Call 1300 364 277**

**Visit**

[www.relationships.org.au](http://www.relationships.org.au)