



## What Is Mental Illness?

### A Complex Response to the World

Mental illness is the popular term used to talk about mental disorder. It is an unfortunate term, because viewing mental unwellness as an illness tends to reduce our sense of optimism.

Mental disorder describes a number of different states of unwellness & disrupted functioning. Mental disorders are 'bio-psycho-social' conditions – just as our mental health and wellbeing are. This means they involve our bodies, minds and environments. They are not permanent states. Sometimes they stick around for a while though, and other times they go away and come back. We can move between wellness and unwellness several times a day as our situations, behaviours and interpretations change. Often in mental disorder part of the problem is that we are doing the *same* things too often, and it gets us stuck in one kind of experience.

This could happen to anyone. Human beings are complex and holistic entities; our wellness is affected by psychological, behavioural, social, biological and environmental elements of living in and responding to the world. And the world is not easy.

### Mental disorder is not a brain disorder.

A brain disorder is:

- Parkinson's disease when brains stop processing dopamine properly.
- Huntington's disease when people have a gene that causes mutation in certain areas of the brain.

Sometimes disorder experiences can happen following a head injury or physical illness; our brains & bodies are a crucial part of the wellness mix. Experience of head injury and physical illness can *lead to* experience of mental disorder. But so can the experience of loss, prolonged work stress, trauma, childhood distress, neglect, bullying, ostracism and any number of other accidents, mistakes and acts of nature that impact on the way we see and interact with the world.

A mental disorder is:

- Depression
- Generalised Anxiety Disorder
- Bipolar Disorder
- Schizophrenia spectrum disorders
- Panic Disorder
- Borderline Personality Disorder..

These are all labels that have been created by the American Psychiatric Association in their diagnostic manual, the DSM-IV. These labels describe different clusters of troubling or unwanted experiences that reliably occur together with frequency among the population.

## Our Brains Are Processors

What is happening in our brains says just as much about what is happening around us and what that means to us as it does about how healthy our brain is.

It is also true that the way we act and think affects our neuro-chemistry. Some behaviours and ways of thinking hold us in the same emotional states for a long time and *sensitise* those pathways in our brains. It can become difficult to change these automatic pathways by ourselves; not only do we need to change the powerful habits that have shaped our reality, but we've got to contend with these physical 'hair-triggers' too.

This is why some people find that medications can be helpful for a while; they can work to balance out the physical responses and allow you to work on the thinking patterns and behaviour. Many people recover from mental disorder by accessing non-medical forms of treatment and support. A lot of people also find that exercise and nutrition play a key role; a great deal of research suggests exercise may be as effective as antidepressants!

No matter what, it is possible to learn new ways of being and start building & strengthening some new response pathways for yourself.

## What Does Diagnosis Mean?

If you have received a mental disorder diagnosis and it is correct, it means that you experience a certain cluster of behaviours, thinking styles and feelings that disrupt your ability to live well and cause you to become stuck in some unhelpful and often pretty distressing experiences.

These unhelpful experiences may be described as mania, hearing voices, depression, feeling hopeless, loss of pleasure, difficulty concentrating, intensified emotions, delusions, paranoia or panic attacks.

In each case there are behaviours and ways of thinking that help set up and maintain the experience. These could be learned responses to difficult experiences you have had in your life, either recently or in the past. No matter what we are going through; we are ALL people responding to our worlds.

Every diagnosis is a little bit different, and each person experiences it in their own way, but there are many commonalities too.

## How Do I Recover?

Start with the basics; make a commitment to nurture yourself for a while. Spend the next couple of weeks making sure you've got all the nutrients you need to be resilient to stress.

Another way to speed your recovery is to link in with your communities. Research shows us that people who have social support networks & resources (**& use them**) tend to have better mental health than people who do not. We are social beings; in the cave-man days of our evolution, survival depended upon our ability to be part of a group and we are still 'wired' that way. Social connection is a crucial part of wellness, when we don't have it our minds automatically fall into survival mode when we encounter stress and this puts us at risk of a whole host of difficulties. So get connected.

As you become more and more skilled at effective communication, balanced thinking, pro-active problem-solving, accessing support and repairing your moods, you will experience more and more wellness and less and less unwellness.