



What Is Mental Illness?

A Complex Response to the World

Mental-health problems are labels for complex responses to the world that keep us stuck in distressing or unhelpful experiences. Mental illness is the popular term used to talk about mental-health problems. Mental-health problems are just as serious as physical illnesses but they are not as easy to understand.

Mental-health problems are 'bio-psycho-social' conditions. This means they involve our bodies, minds and situations. They are not permanent states that require lifelong treatment. We can move between wellness and unwellness several times a day as our situations, behaviours, physical states and ways of thinking shift and change.

Often part of the problem is that we are doing the same things too often, and it gets us caught in one kind of experience.

This could happen to anyone. Human beings are complex and holistic entities; our wellness is affected by all of the physical, mental and social aspects of living in and responding to the world. And the world is not easy.

Mental-health problems are not brain disorders.

A brain disorder is:

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

Sometimes mental-health problems can happen following a head injury or physical illness; our brains and bodies are a crucial part of the wellness mix. Experience of head injury, brain disorders and physical illness can lead to experience of mental-health problems. 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-health problem 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. These labels describe different clusters of troubling or unwanted experiences that reliably occur together often. These experiences can be caused by many different things and there is no single cause that is the same for all people, even if they have the same diagnosis.

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 a Diagnosis Mean?

If you have received a 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. Every diagnosis has differences and each person experiences it in their own way, but there are many commonalities too.

In each case there are situations, behaviours and ways of thinking that help set up the experience and keep it going. These could be learned responses to difficult things that have happened, either recently or in the past. A lot of people with mental-health problems have been through trauma in their lives, but this isn't true for everyone. A diagnosis doesn't say anything about what might be causing the problem. They just describe what the symptoms of it are. No matter what the mental-health problem is, we are ALL people responding to our worlds.

Nearly half of the population will go through a mental-health problem in their lifetimes. So it is a completely normal thing to face as part of being human in this world. A mental disorder diagnosis is nothing to be ashamed of. A diagnosis is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign that we are struggling in our response to something and could do with some help.

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 and resources (and actually 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.

There are heaps of people out there whose job it is to help you. Support workers can help with goals and navigating the system. Therapists can help with addressing underlying causes. Medical doctors can help with physical health and referrals. Psychiatrists can help with medication and referrals. And your community is full of recovery resources if you think creatively. 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. The most important thing to remember is that you will get through it and you will grow from it.