

What is Mental Illness?

*Ajunnginiq Centre at the
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WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

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AJUNNGINIQ CENTRE

The Ajunnginiq Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization shall promote practices that will restore a healthy Inuit lifestyle and improve the health status of Inuit, through research and research dissemination, education and awareness, human resource development, and sharing information on Inuit-specific health policies and practices.

The Ajunnginiq Centre's five main areas of focus are to:

- Improve and promote Inuit health through knowledge-based activities;
- Promote understanding of the health issues affecting Inuit;
- Facilitate and promote research and develop research partnerships;
- Foster participation of Inuit in the delivery of health care; and,
- Affirm and protect Inuit traditional healing practices.

INTRODUCTION

Like people around the world, some Inuit also suffer from mental illness. However, people may not understand mental illness. We may avoid ill people, or make comments about them because their behaviour may be strange. Sick people themselves may not understand why they are feeling or acting a certain way. But just as in physical illness, there are biological and environmental causes for mental illness, and there are medications and treatments that can help.

The purpose of this booklet is to give basic information about mental illness, with specific examples of common illnesses. Knowing more about the symptoms, causes and treatments may help individuals and families understand what is happening and when to seek help.

*People who are mentally ill cannot help acting and feeling in certain ways.
Try to understand the illness, and look for medical help. Mental illness is like
physical illness, and there are ways to make it better.*

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illness refers to problems of the brain and mind that cause severe, and unusual changes or problems in:

- feelings;
- behaviours;
- senses (e.g. hearing and seeing and sensations)
- thoughts;
- understanding of events;
- ability to relate to other people.

We all have times when we feel depressed or sad, or more active and excited than usual, or have trouble concentrating, or talk out loud to ourselves, or get a thought in our minds and can't get rid of it. Those things are normal in human beings. But when a person is mentally ill, these kinds of feelings and thoughts and behaviours are very much more extreme and unusual.

Different mental illnesses show different symptoms, but generally, people who are having an episode of mental illness show some kind of serious changes in all three areas – thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Examples of severe changes or problems in thoughts, senses, and understanding:

- hearing, seeing, smelling things that aren't really there;
- unrealistic or mistaken beliefs (examples: believing that people are trying to kill you; that a movie star is in love with you; that you are God or a famous person);
- having certain thoughts constantly and not being able to stop or change the thoughts;
- serious inability to concentrate;
- unable to connect thoughts together in a way that makes sense;
- constant and extreme worry and anxiety.

Examples of changes or problems in behaviour:

- sleeping way too much, or not able to sleep at all;
- letting self get dirty and uncared for;
- avoiding social contact and previously enjoyable activities;
- laughing or crying inappropriately;
- talking in ways that don't make sense;
- strange movements or behaviours (examples: talking out loud to no one; rigid or unusual body positions);
- unable to control behaviour (examples: can't stop walking back and forth; sudden violence; washing hands over and over).

Examples of changes or problems in feelings or mood:

- extreme feelings of "feeling great" and excitement;
- angry, scared or suspicious for no logical reason;

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

- extreme sadness or hopelessness, sometimes leading to thoughts or talk of suicide;
- sudden emotional changes and mood swings;
- unable to feel/express happiness or interest in anything.

Even if a person has symptoms listed above, it is hard to say for certain what will happen. Sometimes mental illness comes and goes, just like physical illness – a person may be ill for a

while, then get better, then get ill again. Sometimes the illness can last a long time, or for the person's lifetime. Sometimes the person will be ill all the time, but with periods of being more sick or less sick. Sometimes illness only happens once in the person's lifetime. And sometimes symptoms that look like mental illness may be caused by a physical problem like certain diseases in the body or the brain.

There are many different types of mental illness, with different signs and causes. Usually a doctor or nurse with special training and experience can help to determine what the problem is, by identifying specific symptoms and other factors related to the symptoms.

WHAT CAUSES MENTAL ILLNESS?

We are still learning about the causes of mental illness. We do know that brain differences, family history, life stresses, and sometimes substance abuse are involved in various ways. Brain differences may involve brain chemistry, physical structure of the brain, injuries to the brain, nutrition, effect of substances, etc., or a combination of factors. Some differences may be inherited ("genetic" or inborn). Some illnesses can be activated by certain life conditions or stresses, especially if a person has an inborn vulnerability (more easily affected than other people) to become ill. Scientists call this the "double hit" theory – meaning they have both genetic and life stress risks to make them ill. For example, if a person is born with a certain pattern of brain chemistry, that person may become seriously depressed more easily than another person when they go through a separation, or drink too much alcohol or use drugs.

HOW IS MENTAL ILLNESS TREATED?

Depending on the illness, doctors and mental health workers use both medication and counselling. Medications are used to change brain chemistry, and different medications are used for different illnesses. These medications have been tested and they are generally very safe if used properly; and they do not cause addiction or dependence if used properly. If they have some side effects, the side effects tend to be less important when compared to the sufferings people go through with a mental illness. It is very common for people to be afraid of medication because of the stigma or bad reputation mental illness has, and taking "crazy pills" may give people the idea that they are "weak" or "crazy". This is not true, of course, and spending as much time as you need talking about it is very important. Counselling is used to help people develop new ways of thinking and behaving that will help them cope with, control or change the illness. For example, developing more positive behaviours and thoughts can help change the brain chemistry that affects depression.

MENTAL ILLNESS TREATMENT AND THE LAW

People cannot be forced to take medication or treatment just because they are ill, physically or mentally. They must understand and agree to treatment. There are rare situations when a person is in danger him or herself, or a danger to others, or is not able to look after him or herself but does not realize it. For these situations, each province and territory has a set of laws (Mental Health Act) that specifies when, how and why a person can be assessed or treated for mental illnesses even if s/he does not consent.

In that rare situation, a person can be taken into care for an assessment or treatment, even if s/he does not or cannot agree. (For example, a mentally ill person may not understand that s/he is ill). Most people and their families thank the medical professionals for helping them afterwards. In order to take a person into hospital against his or her will, there are very specific rules and limits on who can apply for assessment or treatment, how long the person can be kept for assessment or treatment, who else can give consent for treatment (for example, certain family members), and so on. These rules protect the rights of patients. The doctors, nurses, judges, Justices of the Peace (JPs) and police officers can provide more information on this.

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *SCHIZOPHRENIA*

Symptoms/characteristics

Possible early signs: withdrawal from social contact; loss of interest in activities; more easily confused or irritated than before; lack of emotion; very little talking; very tired.

Increased symptoms: very confused thoughts; false or unrealistic or strange beliefs; hearing and seeing things which are not really happening; very inappropriate or strange behaviour; jumbled talk.

In some forms of schizophrenia, patients may also be very suspicious and hostile.

About one per cent of the world's population develops schizophrenia. Usually men have the first episode of illness in late teens or early twenties, women in their late twenties. Some people may have only one episode of illness and not be affected again. Others may have a few periods of illness; in between they are able to live quite normal lives. Others become increasingly and seriously disabled for all their lives.

Causes

Not clearly understood yet. There may be more than one cause. It seems clear that there are both genetic and environmental factors involved. It is likely that stress of some kind triggers the underlying brain sensitivity, resulting in the illness.

Abnormalities in brain chemistry are definitely involved.

Treatment choices

Medication.

Counselling to encourage people to take their medication and learn to deal with their symptoms. Patient and family counselling to develop coping and helping skills.

Help the person to develop social, work, and self care skills, and to maintain stability in the community. It is important to have a good living structure and avoid life stresses as much as possible.

(Note: The strong medications may cause unpleasant side-effects, so sometimes ill people do not want to take their medicine.)

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *FIRST-EPISODE PSYCHOSIS*

Psychosis is a condition during which a person loses touch with reality. S/he may experience things such as hearing voices, seeing things, and feeling touches that don't exist, believing in things that are not real, and having unusual, bizarre behaviours.

Symptoms/characteristics

A first brief episode of psychosis is most likely to happen to young people.

Symptoms: difficulty concentrating, remembering, understanding; talk and thoughts that don't make sense; difficulty having a conversation; false unusual beliefs; hearing, seeing, or smelling things that aren't really there; feeling like thoughts have sped up or slowed down; loss of energy; loss of interest in people or activities; lack of emotions or inappropriate emotions; unusual or strange behaviour.

Symptoms can happen gradually or suddenly.

Causes

Psychosis always involves changes in the brain, but the reasons are not fully understood yet. It is often hard to know what causes psychosis, but it can be an effect of substance abuse, a severe mood disorder, a severe reaction to extreme stress, a brain disorder, or the beginning of an illness like schizophrenia.

Treatment choices

Medication.

Supportive counselling for the individual and the family.

Recovery from a first episode will depend on the cause. But research shows that the earlier a person seeks help, the more chance there is of a positive outcome.

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *MOOD (FEELING) DISORDERS*

Symptoms/characteristics

Examples of mood disorders:

- Bipolar disorder (this was once called manic-depression): Periods of severe depression alternate with periods of feeling abnormally "high," energetic, restless, irritable, easily distracted, talkative, etc. Poor judgment – for example, possible risky sexual behaviour or spending money without thinking. Possibly fast mood swings – for example, from very cheerful to very angry to very sad.

Causes

Probable chemical imbalance in the brain, triggered by a combination of genetic sensitivity and environmental factors such as stressful situations and life events.

Treatment choices

Medication.

Counselling (for example, teaching patients to recognize and cope with signs of illness starting; changing thoughts; developing regular sleep, activity and social routines).

Support groups.

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *MOOD (FEELING) DISORDERS*

Symptoms/characteristics

- Depression: Feelings of deep sadness, guilt, hopelessness; loss of interest in life and friends; changes in eating and sleeping (too much or too little); possibly thoughts of death and suicide; problems concentrating, making decisions, etc. In order for these feelings and behaviours to be considered serious depression, they must be present for at least a couple of weeks. (That is because everybody has short periods when they may feel hopeless or not be able to sleep, etc. However, in those cases, people are able to do things that lift the low feelings, or the feelings go away by themselves, within a few days. Serious depression is when the feelings and behaviours go on and on.)

Causes

Changes in brain chemistry which may be caused by genetic sensitivity, stressful events, alcohol and drug use, etc. or a combination of factors.

Treatment choices

Medication and/or counselling (for example: changing thoughts; focusing on positive events; developing positive activities and social relationships; problem-solving skills).

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: ANXIETY DISORDERS

There are many different kinds of anxiety disorders.

Symptoms/characteristics

In all types: intense worry, fear, feelings that something bad will happen, even when there is no real reason; may result in sleeplessness, muscle tension, dizziness, inability to take part in activities, etc.

Examples of specific types of anxiety illnesses:

- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Unable to stop doing certain behaviours or having certain thoughts, over and over;
- Phobia: Intense and unreasonable fear of something (examples: flying, going out of the house);
- Panic Disorder: Intense sudden fear and panic (often with physical symptoms like feeling faint and breathless) for no real reason;
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Repeated frightening thoughts, dreams and memories of violent or threatening events from the past.

Causes

Combination of brain chemical imbalances and life events.

Treatment choices

Medication for some kinds of anxiety illnesses, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, or for certain consequences like depression.

Counselling to help patients develop new ways of thinking and behaving.

Special training to cope and make the anxieties and worries less overwhelming or dominating – medically this is called "desensitization". It helps the person become less sensitive to specific situations that caused anxiety.

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *PERSONALITY DISORDERS*

There are about 10 different kinds of personality disorders.

Symptoms/characteristics

This is a complex area and it may take a very long time to make sure someone has a personality disorder and not some other mental illness. Personality disorder symptoms can be: unusual inability to form steady and lasting relationships with others; extreme anger, hostility; always being demanding and manipulative; unstable emotions; difficulty seeing own behaviour as a cause of problems. For persons with personality disorders, these are the basic, long-lasting characteristics of their behaviour, which can be very hard to change.

(see examples on following page)

Causes

Probable brain abnormalities or sensitivity, combined with life events such as childhood abuse, neglect and other stressful or traumatic events.

Treatment choices

Hard to treat because person may not see him/herself as having a problem. The anti-social types are especially hard to treat.

Special counselling strategies that help the person develop understanding of self and others, and change behaviour and thoughts. Sometimes medication, especially to deal with those types of illness that include anxiety or depression.

SOME MAIN TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES: *PERSONALITY DISORDERS*

Symptoms/characteristics

Causes

Treatment choices

Examples of two most difficult specific types:

- Borderline Personality Disorder: Up-and-down, constantly changing relationships; episodes of strong anger or depression; sudden emotional swings for small reasons (for example, fast feelings of love changing to intense anger and jealousy); intense sensitivity to feelings of rejection; impulsive and risky behaviour (casual sex, alcohol and drug abuse); possible suicide threats and attempts.
- Anti-social Personality Disorder: Breaking social rules and laws; easily angered and aggressive; lying; lack of responsibility; blame others; poor relationships.

EXAMPLES OF OTHER BRAIN PROBLEMS AFFECTING BEHAVIOUR/EMOTIONS/THINKING:

ADD (ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER) AND ADHD (ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER)

Symptoms/characteristics

Serious problems in concentrating, making decisions, organizing; easily distracted; acting before thinking. Some people are hyperactive, need to move around constantly. (Noticed most in childhood but often continues through adulthood.)

Causes

Don't yet know for sure, but probably abnormalities in brain chemistry and structure. May be an inherited tendency; prenatal problems or birth problems may be involved.

Treatment choices

Medication.

Counselling: teaching patient to develop regular routines and ways of managing behaviour.

Support and information for the family.

EXAMPLES OF OTHER BRAIN PROBLEMS AFFECTING BEHAVIOUR/EMOTIONS/THINKING: *AUTISM*

Symptoms/characteristics

Serious problems in the ability to communicate, form relationships with others, and react appropriately to the world around. Problems are usually noticed by age three. Some children do not speak or make eye contact or react to voices. Often they show behaviour like repeated rocking back and forth or flapping their hands. Some may repeatedly hurt themselves by biting themselves, head-banging, etc. Some have serious learning and thinking problems. A few may be very skilled in one specific talent like playing a musical instrument without ever being taught.

Causes

Brain abnormalities based on inherited genetic differences. We don't yet know exactly how or why this happens.

Treatment choices

Very difficult to change. Certain medications may help adults with some symptoms. Intense special education starting early in life can help children develop better language and social skills.

EXAMPLES OF OTHER BRAIN PROBLEMS AFFECTING BEHAVIOUR/EMOTIONS/THINKING: *ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE*

Symptoms/characteristics

Early symptoms: forgetfulness, confusion.
Later symptoms: problems with language, thinking, understanding, memory, etc; behaviour and personality changes; aggression, anxiety, restlessness, activity with no purpose. Usually happens in older people.

Causes

Brain damage causing the thinking, language and memory parts of the brain to be gradually destroyed. We don't yet know exactly what causes the damage.

Treatment choices

No cure or effective treatment yet. Medication can help control behaviour and emotions.

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