Addressing Mental Illness

What is Mental Illness?

In many First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, good health was, and often still is, a result of a balance of ones entire being, 'mind, body and spirit.' For First Nations, history, culture, traditions, spirituality and identity are all critical to well being and positive mental health. Without these essential foundations, well-being and good health cannot be attained.

Mental illness is a collection of disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety. Mental illness interferes with relationships and affects a person's ability to function on a day-to-day basis, often leading to social isolation[1].

Who is at risk?

Most people believe that mental disorders are rare and "happen to someone else." In fact, mental illnesses are common and widespread. Statistics show that one in every five Canadians will have a mental health problem at some point in their lives. Mental illness affects males and females, young and old, and is found in every ethno-cultural and socio-economic group.

What are the symptoms of mental illness and what causes it?

The symptoms can range from:

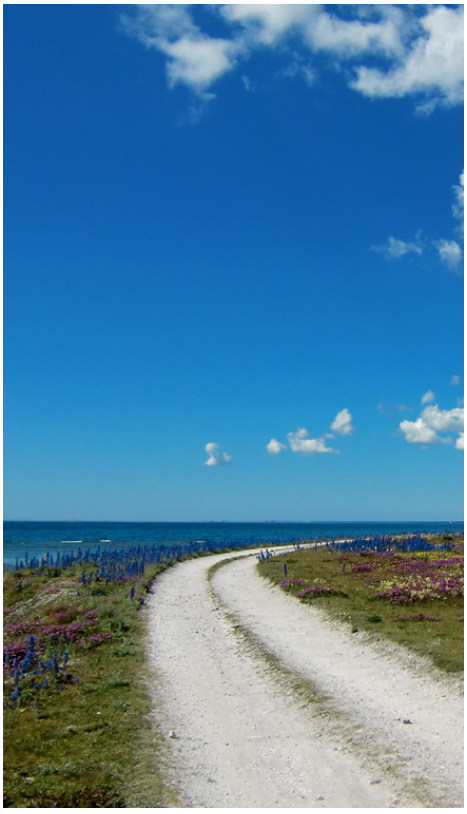
- loss of motivation and energy
- changed sleep patterns
- extreme mood swings, disturbances in thought or perception or overwhelming obsessions or fears.

Mental health problems faced by aboriginals arise from a long history of colonization, residential school trauma, discrimination and oppression, and losses of land, language and livelihood.

Mental illness is usually the result of an interaction of physical, environmental, and social factors. Physical factors can include a person's individual genetic make-up, which may put them at higher risk for developing a mental illness.

Factors can also include physical trauma, such as a brain injury, or the misuse of substances such as street drugs or alcohol. Environmental factors that can negatively impact a person's mental health can include severe psychological trauma, such as war, or sexual abuse.

Social factors such as where people live, whether they have strong support networks (close family and friends), and people's work environment impact mental well-being. The amount of stress people are under can impact one's mental health, especially in situations where individuals are unable to change their circumstances.



The path to mental wellness

The earlier someone receives treatment for a mental illness, the better their long-term outcome. People can be active in changing attitudes towards mental illness, starting with their own.

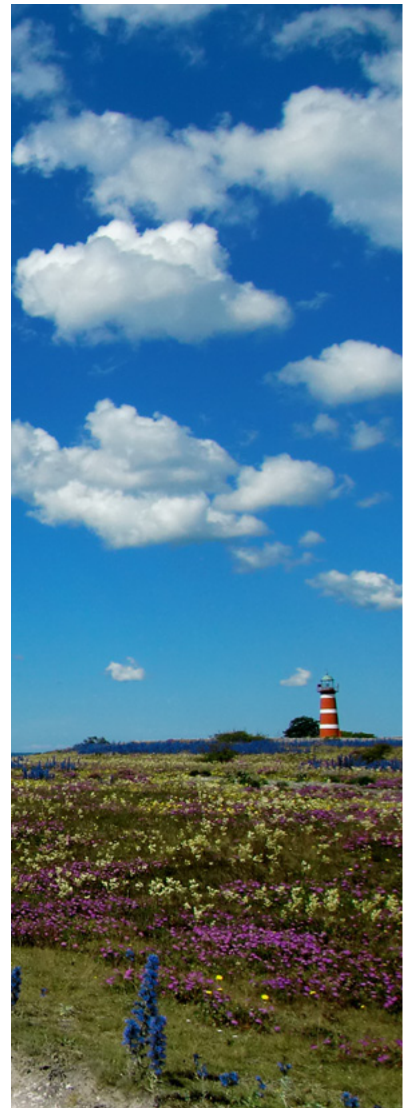
People can ensure that those with mental illness are full, participating members in their workplaces, in their neighbourhoods, and in their lives.

People can, and do, recover from mental illness. Recovery is a very individual thing, and can be defined as living well in the presence or absence of symptoms. Hope, healing, a sense of empowerment and social connections are essential to an individual's recovery from mental illness. Recovery focused social and psychiatric services, educational programs, affordable housing and financial assistance are also vital to recovery and acquiring whole health.

Mental wellness includes self-esteem, personal dignity, cultural identity and connectedness in the presence of a harmonious physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellness. Mental wellness must be defined in terms of the values and beliefs of Inuit, Metis and First Nations people.

There are many new and different ways to understand, treat, and accept mental illness, even outside the traditional medical model of mental health.[2] First Nations, Métis and Inuit can embrace the achievement of whole health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and economic well-being) through a comprehensive and coordinated approach that respects, values and utilizes traditional and cultural knowledge, methodologies, languages and ways of knowing.

The journey to mental wellness and wellbeing can be a lifelong process to achieve balance of body, mind and spirit.[3]



1 The Canadian Mental Health Association. (2011). toronto.cmha.ca. Retrieved January 17, 2011 from www.toronto.cmha.ca.

2 Small, Meredith F. The Culture of Our Discontent: Beyond the Medical Model of Mental Illness. 2006. Joseph Henry Press.

3 Wellness - A First Nations, Inuit and Métis View of Health. 2010. miaw.ca. Retrieved January 19, 2011 from http://www.miaw.ca/en/wellness/overview.aspx.

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