



MENTAL HEALTH

What is it, and how do I spot it?



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01. What are Mental Health Problems?

In many ways, mental health is just like physical health: everybody has it and we need to take care of it.

Good mental health means being generally able to think, feel and react in the ways that you need and want to live your life. However, if you go through a period of poor mental health you might find the ways you're frequently thinking, feeling or reacting become difficult, or even impossible, to cope with. This can feel just as bad as a physical illness, or even worse.

Mental health problems affect around one in four people in any given year. They range from common problems, such as depression and anxiety, to rarer problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Experiencing a mental health problem is often upsetting, confusing and frightening – particularly at first. If you become unwell, you may feel that it's a sign of weakness, or that you are 'losing your mind'.

These fears are often reinforced by the negative (and often unrealistic) way that people experiencing mental health problems are shown on TV, in films and by the media. This may stop you from talking about your problems, or seeking help. This, in turn, is likely to increase your distress and sense of isolation.

However, in reality, mental health problems are a common human experience. Most people know someone who has experienced a mental health problem. They can happen to all kinds of people from all walks of life. And it's likely that, when you find a combination of self-care, treatment and support that works for you, you will get better.



02. What types are there?

There are many different mental health problems. Some of them have similar symptoms, so you may experience the symptoms of more than one mental health problem, or be given several diagnoses at once. Or you might not have any particular diagnosis, but still be finding things very difficult. Everyone's experience is different and can change at different times. This section provides a brief description of a few mental health problems.



Depression

Depression is a feeling of low mood that lasts for a long time and affects your everyday life. It can make you feel hopeless, despairing, guilty, worthless, unmotivated and exhausted. It can affect your self-esteem, sleep, appetite, and your physical health.

In its mildest form, depression doesn't stop you leading a normal life, but it makes everything harder to do and seem less worthwhile. At its most severe, depression can make you feel suicidal, and be life-threatening.

Anxiety Problems

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Occasional anxiety is a normal human experience. But if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, they can be overwhelming. You might also experience physical symptoms such as sleep problems and panic attacks.

Phobias

A phobia is an extreme form of fear or anxiety triggered by a particular situation (such as going outside) or object (such as spiders), even when it's very unlikely to be dangerous. A fear becomes a phobia if the fear is out of proportion to the danger, it lasts for more than six months, and has a significant impact on how you live your day-to-day life.



02. What types are there?

Eating Problems

Eating problems are not just about food. They can be about difficult things and painful feelings which you may be finding hard to face or resolve. Lots of people think that if you have an eating problem you will be over- or underweight, and that being a certain weight is always associated with a specific eating problem, but this is a myth. Anyone, regardless of age, gender or weight, can be affected by eating problems.



The most common eating disorder diagnoses are anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, and other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED). But it's also possible to have a very difficult relationship with food and not fit the criteria for any specific diagnosis.

Schizophrenia

Views on schizophrenia have changed over the years. Lots of people question whether it's really a distinct condition, or actually a few different conditions that overlap. But you may still be given this diagnosis if you experience symptoms such as:

- psychosis (such as hallucinations or delusions)
- disorganised thinking and speech
- feeling disconnected from your feelings
- difficulty concentrating
- wanting to avoid people
- a lack of interest in things
- not wanting to look after yourself

Because psychiatric experts disagree about what schizophrenia is, some people argue that this term shouldn't be used at all. Others think the name of the condition doesn't matter, and prefer to just focus on helping you manage your symptoms and meeting your individual needs.



02. What types are there?



Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. The term is often misused in daily conversation - for example, you might hear people talk about being 'a bit OCD', if they like things to be neat and tidy. But the reality of this disorder is a lot more complex and serious.

OCD has two main parts: obsessions (unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind; and compulsions (repetitive activities that you feel you have to do to reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession).

Personality Disorders

Personality disorder is a type of mental health problem where your attitudes, beliefs and behaviours cause you longstanding problems in your life. If you have this diagnosis it doesn't mean that you're fundamentally different from other people - but you may regularly experience difficulties with how you think about yourself and others, and find it very difficult to change these unwanted patterns.

There are several different categories and types of personality disorder, but most people who are diagnosed with a particular personality disorder don't fit any single category very clearly or consistently. Also, the term 'personality disorder' can sound very judgemental.



Did you know...

Between one in five and one in six working age adults is depressed, anxious or experiencing stress-related problems at any one time.

03. What might I/my colleagues experience?

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are a type of fear response. They're an exaggeration of your body's normal response to danger, stress or excitement. During a panic attack physical symptoms can build up very quickly, including:

- a pounding heartbeat or chest pains
- sweating and nausea (feeling sick)
- feeling faint and unable to breathe
- shaky limbs, or feeling like your legs are turning to jelly
- feeling as if you aren't connected to your body

It's easy to mistake these for the signs of a heart attack or another serious medical problem. You might feel very afraid that you're losing control, that you're going to faint or even going to die.



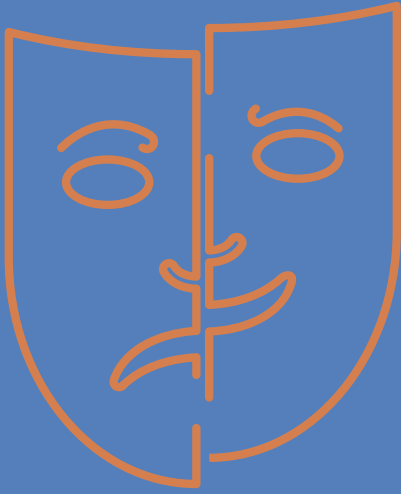
Self-Harm

Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences. You may not know why you self-harm, but it can be a means of expressing feelings that you can't put into words or think clearly about. After self-harming you may feel a short-term sense of release, but the cause of your distress is unlikely to have gone away. Self-harm can also bring up very difficult emotions and could make you feel worse.

Did you know...

One in five people take a day off due to stress, yet up to 90% feel unable to be honest about this being the reason for their absence.

03. What might I/my colleagues experience?



Psychosis

Psychosis (also called a psychotic experience or psychotic episode) is when you perceive or interpret reality in a very different way from people around you. The most common types of psychosis are:

- Hallucinations, such as hearing voices or having visions
- Delusions, such as paranoia or delusions of grandeur

Psychosis affects people in different ways. You might experience it once, have short episodes throughout your life, or live with it most of the time. It's also possible to have a psychotic experience without ever being diagnosed with a particular mental health problem.

Some people have a positive experience of psychosis. You may find it comforting, or feel that it helps you understand the world or makes you more creative.

Suicidal Feelings

Many people experience suicidal thoughts and feelings at some point in their lifetime. They can be very unpleasant, intrusive and frightening, but having thoughts about suicide doesn't necessarily mean that you intend to act on them. Most people don't go on to attempt to take their own lives. However, if you feel you may act on suicidal feelings and become unable to keep yourself safe then this is a mental health emergency. It's important to treat it as seriously as you would any physical health emergency, and seek urgent help – for example by dialling 999, going to your nearest A&E, or calling the Samaritans on 116 123.

IMPORTANT

A mental health issue is not a sign of weakness; in fact it can be just the opposite.

Determined, energetic, purposeful high achievers can be the most vulnerable, because they push themselves so hard. Winston Churchill, Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens and Ludwig van Beethoven all experienced mental health issues.

04. How can I help myself?

Self-care techniques and general lifestyle changes can help manage the symptoms of many mental health problems. They may also help prevent some problems from developing or getting worse. Here are some tips for looking after yourself that you might find helpful:



Nourish your social life

Feeling connected to other people is important. It can help you to feel valued and confident about yourself, and can give you a different perspective on things. If you can, try to spend some time connecting with friends and family – even a text or phone call can make a difference.

Try Peer Support

Peer support brings together people who have had similar experiences to support each other. Find peer groups online to talk to others.

Make time for therapeutic activities

- Relaxation – having a bath, listen to music, walking your dog, playing with pets
- Mindfulness – be aware, be present in the moment
- Getting into nature – go to the park or countryside, and caring for plants or animals can help you get some benefits from nature



04. How can I help myself?

Look after your physical health

- Make sure to get enough sleep
- Keep physically active
- Avoid drugs and alcohol
- Make time for personal care
- Eat healthy



Did you know...

One in four people will experience a mental health issue in any given year.

Contact a specialist organisation

- **Anxiety UK** - offers advice and support for people living with anxiety.
- **B-eat** - provides information and support for people affected by eating disorders.
- **Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)** - supports men's mental health.
- **FRANK** - provides confidential drugs advice and information.
- **Hearing Voices Network** - runs an online forum and local groups across the country.
- **Mind Out** - offers mental health advice and support for anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+.
- **No Panic** - offers help and advice about anxiety disorders, including a helpline and recovery groups.



05. How can I help others?

If you know someone has been unwell, don't be afraid to ask how they are. They might want to talk about it, or they might not. But just letting them know they don't have to avoid the issue with you is important. Spending time with them lets them know you care, and can help you understand what they're going through.

Ask how you can help

Everyone will want support at different times and in different ways, so ask how you can help. It might be useful to help keep track of medication, or give support at a doctor's appointment. If your friend wants to get more exercise, you could do this together.



Be Open-Minded

Phrases like 'cheer up', 'I'm sure it'll pass' and 'pull yourself together' definitely don't help. Try to be non-judgemental and listen. Someone experiencing a mental health problem often knows best what's helpful for them.

Show trust and respect

Trust and respect between you and your colleague, friend or family member are very important - they help to rebuild and maintain a sense of self-esteem, which a mental health problem can seriously damage.

Look after yourself

Supporting someone else can sometimes be stressful. Making sure that you look after your own wellbeing can mean that you have the energy, time and distance you need to be able to help. For example:

- Set boundaries and don't take too much on. If you become unwell yourself you won't be able to offer as much support.
- Share your caring role with others, if you can. It's often easier to support someone if you're not doing it alone.

05. How can I help others?

What emotional support can I offer?

If someone lets you know that they are experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, it's common to feel like you don't know what to do or say – but you don't need any special training to show someone you care about them. Often just being there for someone and doing small things can be really valuable. For example:

- **Listen.** Simply giving someone space to talk, and listening to how they're feeling, can be really helpful in itself. If they're finding it difficult, let them know that you're there when they are ready.
- **Offer reassurance.** Seeking help can feel lonely, and sometimes scary. You can reassure someone by letting them know that they are not alone, and that you will be there to help.
- **Stay calm.** Even though it might be upsetting to hear that someone you care about is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help your friend or family member feel calmer too, and show them that they can talk to you openly without upsetting you.
- **Be patient.** You might want to know more details about their thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it's important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.
- **Try not to make assumptions.** Your perspective might be useful to your colleague, friend or family member, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.
- **Keep social contact.** Part of the emotional support you offer could be to keep things as normal as possible. This could include involving your friend in social events, or chatting about other parts of your lives.



05. How can I help others?

What **practical** support can I offer?

There are lots of practical things you can do to support someone who is ready to seek help. For example:

- Look for information that might be helpful. When someone is seeking help they may feel worried about making the right choice, or feel that they have no control over their situation.
- Help to write down lists of questions that the person you're supporting wants to ask their doctor, or help to put points into an order that makes sense (for example, most important point first).
- Help to organise paperwork, for example making sure that your friend or family member has somewhere safe to keep their notes, prescriptions and records of appointments.
- Ask them if there are any specific practical tasks you could help with, and work on those.
- Learn more about the problem they experience, to help you think about other ways you could support them.



06. What can I do if someone doesn't want my help?

If you feel that someone you care about is clearly struggling but can't or won't reach out for help, and won't accept any help you offer, it's understandable to feel frustrated, distressed and powerless. But it's important to accept that they are an individual, and that there are always limits to what you can do to support another person.

You can:

- **Be patient.** You won't always know the full story, and there may be reasons why they are finding it difficult to ask for help.
- **Offer emotional support and reassurance.** Let them know you care about them and you'll be there if they change their mind.
- **Inform them how to seek help when they're ready.**

You can't:

- **Force someone to talk to you.** It can take time for someone to feel able to talk openly, and putting pressure on them to talk might make them feel less comfortable telling you about their experiences.
- **Force someone to get help.** As adults, we are all ultimately responsible for making our own decisions. This includes when – or if – we choose to seek help when we feel unwell.

What if they believe things that seem very unusual or scary to me?

If someone is experiencing reality in a very different way from people around them, they may not realise or agree that seeking help could be useful for them. They may be experiencing psychosis, mania, hearing voices or feeling very paranoid. In this case, it can also be helpful to:

- Focus on how their beliefs are making them feel (for example anxious, scared, threatened or confused), as these feelings will be very real.
- Avoid confirming or denying their beliefs. Instead it can help to say something like "I understand that you see things that way, but it's not like that for me."

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what it means to experience psychosis. Lots of people wrongly think that the word 'psychotic' means 'dangerous'. But it's important to remember that in reality, very few people who experience psychosis ever hurt anyone else.

07. Identifying the early warning signs and talking at an early stage

Early warning signs of mental ill health

There will be times when you notice that someone is behaving out of character or seems unhappy. Recognising colleagues' difficulties at an early stage makes it easier to help them and provide appropriate support. Here's a list of behaviours and warning signs to watch out for:

- Not getting things done – missing deadlines or forgetting tasks.
- Erratic or unacceptable behaviour.
- Irritability, aggression, tearfulness.
- Complaining about the workload.
- Being withdrawn and not participating in conversations or out-of-work activities.
- Increased consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and/or sedatives.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Indecision.
- Difficulty remembering things.
- Loss of confidence.
- Unplanned absences.
- Arguments/conflicts with others.
- Increased errors and/or accidents.
- Taking on too much work and volunteering for every new project.
- Being adamant they are right.
- Working too many hours – first in, last out/emailing out of hours or while on holiday.
- Being louder or more exuberant than usual.
- Negative changes to ways of working or socialising with colleagues.

Physical signs might include the following:

- Constant tiredness.
- Sickness absence.
- Being run down and frequent minor illnesses.
- Headaches.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Weight loss or gain.
- Lack of care over their appearance.
- Gastrointestinal disorders.
- Rashes/eczema.



07. Identifying the early warning signs and talking at an early stage

If you notice any of the above signs and are concerned for your colleague, here are some tips on how to communicate...

Non-judgemental listening

The listener should use verbal and non-verbal listening skills to hear and understand exactly what's being said, and allow the person to speak freely and comfortably without feeling judged. It requires three key attributes.

1. **Acceptance** – respecting the person's feelings, experiences and values although they may be different from yours. Not judging or criticising because of your own beliefs and attitudes. You accept them as they are.
2. **Genuineness** – showing that you accept the person and their values by what you say and do. You don't make a moral judgement.
3. **Empathy** – the ability to place yourself in the other person's shoes and demonstrate to them that you hear and understand what they are saying and feeling. You get on their wavelength.

Verbal

- Listen without interrupting.
- Pay attention.
- Ask appropriate questions to make sure you are both clear about what is being said.
- Listen to the words and the tone of voice and observe the body language.
- Check you understand what the person is saying by restating it.
- Summarise facts and feelings.
- Use minimal prompts ('Mmm', 'Ah', or 'I see') to keep the conversation moving.
- Don't worry about pauses or silences, as the person may be simply thinking or temporarily lost for words.
- Avoid the temptation to fill the silences as you may break their train of thought or the rapport between you.

Non-Verbal

- Be attentive.
- Keep appropriate eye contact (don't stare or avoid their eyes).
- Maintain an open body position.
- Sit down even if the other person is standing, to make you seem less threatening.
- Try not to sit directly opposite the other person, which can seem confrontational.

08. Your Mental Health First Aider



Mia Pritchard

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If you would like to discuss any of the topics in this booklet, or would like to talk about your own mental health, please contact Mia Pritchard.

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