

Mental Illness Definition

Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.

Many people have mental health concerns from time to time. But a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function.

A mental illness can make you miserable and can cause problems in your daily life, such as at work or in relationships. In most cases, symptoms can be managed with a combination of medications and counseling (psychotherapy).

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary, depending on the particular disorder, circumstances and other factors. Mental illness symptoms can affect emotions, thoughts and behaviors.

Examples of signs and symptoms include:

- *Feeling sad or down*
- *Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate*
- *Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt*
- *Extreme mood changes of highs and lows*
- *Withdrawal from friends and activities*
- *Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping*
- *Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations*
- *Inability to cope with daily problems or stress*
- *Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people*
- *Alcohol or drug abuse*
- *Major changes in eating habits*
- *Sex drive changes*
- *Excessive anger, hostility or violence*
- *Suicidal thinking*

Sometimes symptoms of a mental health disorder appear as physical problems, such as stomach pain, back pain, headache, or other unexplained aches and pains.

When to see a doctor

If you have any signs or symptoms of a mental illness, see your primary care provider or mental health specialist. Most mental illnesses don't improve on their own, and if untreated, a mental illness may get worse over time and cause serious problems

Causes

Mental illnesses, in general, are thought to be caused by a variety of genetic and environmental factors:

- **Inherited traits.** Mental illness is more common in people whose biological (blood) relatives also have a mental illness. Certain genes may increase your risk of developing a mental illness, and your life situation may trigger it.
- **Environmental exposures before birth.** Exposure to viruses, toxins, alcohol or drugs while in the womb can sometimes be linked to mental illness.
- **Brain chemistry.** Biochemical changes in the brain are thought to affect mood and other aspects of mental health. Naturally occurring brain chemicals called neurotransmitters play a role in some mental illnesses. In some cases, hormonal imbalances affect mental health.

Preparing for your appointment

Whether you schedule an appointment with your primary health care provider to talk about mental health concerns or you're referred to a mental health provider, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist, take steps to prepare for your appointment.

What you can do

Before your appointment, make a list of:

- **Any symptoms you or people close to you have noticed**, and for how long.
- **Key personal information**, including traumatic events in your past and any current, major stressors.
- **Your medical information**, including other physical or mental health conditions.

- **Any medications**, vitamins, herbal products or other supplements you take, and their dosages.

If possible, take a family member or friend along. Someone who has known you for a long time may be able to share important information with your provider, with your permission.

Make a list of questions to ask, such as:

- *What type of mental illness might I have?*
- *Why can't I get over mental illness on my own?*
- *How do you treat my type of mental illness?*
- *Will talk therapy help?*
- *Are there medications that might help?*
- *How long will treatment take?*
- *What can I do to help myself?*
- *Do you have any brochures or other printed material that I can have?*
- *What websites do you recommend?*

Don't hesitate to ask questions anytime you don't understand something.

What to expect from your doctor

During your appointment, your doctor or mental health provider is likely to ask you several questions about your mood, thoughts and behavior, such as:

- *When did you first notice symptoms?*
- *How is your daily life affected by your symptoms?*
- *What treatment, if any, have you had for mental illness?*
- *What have you tried on your own to feel better or control your symptoms?*
- *What things make you feel worse?*
- *Have family members or friends commented on your mood or behavior?*
- *Do you have blood relatives with a mental illness?*
- *What do you hope to gain from treatment?*
- *What medications or over-the-counter herbs and supplements do you take?*
- *Do you drink alcohol or use illegal drugs?*

Tests and diagnosis

To determine a diagnosis and check for any related complications, you may have:

- **A physical exam.** Your doctor will try to rule out physical problems that could cause your symptoms.
- **Lab tests.** These may include a check of your thyroid function or a screening for alcohol and drugs, for example.
- **A psychological evaluation.** A doctor or mental health provider talks to you about your symptoms, thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns. You may be asked to fill out a questionnaire to help answer these questions.

Determining which mental illness you have

Sometimes it's difficult to find out which mental illness may be causing your symptoms. But taking the time and effort to get an accurate diagnosis will help determine the appropriate treatment.

The defining symptoms for each mental illness are detailed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association. This manual is used by mental health providers to diagnose mental conditions and by insurance companies to reimburse for treatment.

Classes of mental illness

The main classes of mental illness are:

- **Neurodevelopmental disorders.** This class covers a wide range of problems that usually begin in infancy, childhood or the teenage years. Examples include autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disorders.
- **Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders.** Psychotic disorders cause detachment from reality (delusions, paranoia and hallucinations). The most notable example is schizophrenia, although other classes of disorders can be associated with detachment from reality at times.
- **Bipolar and related disorders.** This class includes disorders with alternating episodes of mania — periods of excessive activity, energy and excitement — and depression.
- **Depressive disorders.** These include disorders that affect how you feel emotionally, such as the level of sadness and happiness. Examples include major depressive disorder and premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

- **Anxiety disorders.** Anxiety is an emotion characterized by the anticipation of future danger or misfortune, accompanied by feeling ill at ease. This class includes generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder and phobias.
- **Obsessive-compulsive and related disorders.** These disorders involve preoccupations or obsessions and repetitive thoughts and actions. Examples include obsessive-compulsive disorder, hoarding and hair-pulling disorder (trichotillomania).
- **Trauma- and stressor-related disorders.** These are adjustment disorders in which a person has trouble coping during or after a stressful life event. Examples include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and acute stress disorder.
- **Dissociative disorders.** These are disorders in which your sense of self is disrupted, such as with dissociative identity disorder and dissociative amnesia.
- **Somatic symptom and related disorders.** A person with one of these disorders may have physical symptoms with no clear medical cause, but the disorders are associated with significant distress and impairment. The disorders include somatic symptom disorder (previously known as hypochondriasis) and factitious disorder.
- **Feeding and eating disorders.** These disorders include disturbances related to eating, such as anorexia nervosa and binge-eating disorder.
- **Elimination disorders.** These disorders relate to the inappropriate elimination of urine or stool by accident or on purpose. Bedwetting (enuresis) is an example.
- **Sleep-wake disorders.** These are disorders of sleep severe enough to require clinical attention, such as insomnia, sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome.
- **Sexual dysfunctions.** These include disorders of sexual response, such as premature ejaculation and female orgasmic disorder.
- **Gender dysphoria.** This refers to the distress that accompanies a person's stated desire to be another gender.
- **Disruptive, impulse-control and conduct disorders.** These disorders include problems with emotional and behavioral self-control, such as kleptomania or intermittent explosive disorder.
- **Substance-related and addictive disorders.** These include problems associated with the use of alcohol, caffeine, tobacco and drugs. This class also includes gambling disorder.
- **Neurocognitive disorders.** Neurocognitive disorders affect your ability to think and reason. This class includes delirium, as well as neurocognitive disorders due to conditions or diseases such as traumatic brain injury or Alzheimer's disease.
- **Personality disorders.** A personality disorder involves a lasting pattern of emotional instability and unhealthy behavior that causes problems in your life and relationships. Examples include borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder.

- **Paraphilic disorders.** These disorders include sexual interest that causes personal distress or impairment or causes potential or actual harm to another person. Examples are sexual sadism, voyeuristic disorder and pedophilic disorder.
- **Other mental disorders.** This class includes mental disorders that are due to other medical conditions or that don't meet the full criteria for one of the above disorders.

Treatments and drugs

Your treatment depends on the type of mental illness you have, its severity and what works best for you. In many cases, a combination of treatments works best.

If you have a mild mental illness with well-controlled symptoms, treatment from one health care provider may be sufficient. However, often a team approach is appropriate to make sure all your psychiatric, medical and social needs are met. This is especially important for severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia.

Medications

Although psychiatric medications don't cure mental illness, they can often significantly improve symptoms. Psychiatric medications can also help make other treatments, such as psychotherapy, more effective. The best medications for you will depend on your particular situation and how your body responds to the medication.

Some of the most commonly used classes of prescription psychiatric medications include:

- **Antidepressants.** Antidepressants are used to treat depression, anxiety and sometimes other conditions. They can help improve symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, lack of energy, difficulty concentrating and lack of interest in activities. Antidepressants are not addictive and do not cause dependency.
- **Anti-anxiety medications.** Anti-anxiety medications are used to treat anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. They may also help reduce agitation and insomnia. Long-term anxiety medications consist mostly of antidepressants that also work for anxiety. There also are fast-acting anti-anxiety medications, which help with short-term relief—but they have the potential to cause dependency and ideally would be used short term.
- **Mood-stabilizing medications.** Mood stabilizers are most commonly used to treat bipolar disorder, which involves alternating episodes of mania and depression. Sometimes mood stabilizers are used with antidepressants to treat depression.

- **Antipsychotic medications.** Antipsychotic medications, also called neuroleptics, are typically used to treat psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia. Antipsychotic medications may also be used to treat bipolar disorders or used with antidepressants to treat depression.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy, also called talk therapy, involves talking about your condition and related issues with a mental health provider. During psychotherapy, you learn about your condition and your moods, feelings, thoughts and behavior. With the insights and knowledge you gain, you can learn coping and stress management skills.

There are many types of psychotherapy, each with its own approach to improving your mental well-being. Psychotherapy often can be successfully completed in a few months, but in some cases, long-term treatment may be needed. It can take place one-on-one, in a group or with family members.

Lifestyle and home remedies

In most cases, a mental illness won't get better if you try to treat it on your own without professional care. But you can do some things for yourself that will build on your treatment plan:

- **Stick to your treatment plan.** Don't skip therapy sessions. Even if you're feeling better, don't skip your medications. If you stop, symptoms may come back. You could also have withdrawal-like symptoms if you stop a medication too suddenly. If you have bothersome medication side effects or other problems with your treatment, talk to your doctor before making changes.
- **Avoid alcohol and drug use.** Using alcohol or illegal drugs can make it difficult to treat a mental illness. If you're addicted, quitting can be a real challenge. If you can't quit on your own, see your doctor or find a support group to help you.
- **Stay active.** Exercise can help you manage symptoms such as depression, stress and anxiety. Physical activity can also counteract the effects of some psychiatric medications that may cause weight gain. Consider walking, swimming, gardening or any form of physical activity that you enjoy. Even light physical activity can make a difference.
- **Don't make important decisions when your symptoms are severe.** Avoid decision-making when you're in the depth of mental illness symptoms, since you may not be thinking clearly.

- **Determine your priorities.** You can reduce the impact of your mental illness by managing your time and energy. Cut back on obligations when necessary and set reasonable goals. Give yourself permission to do less when your symptoms are bad. You may find it helpful to make a list of daily tasks, use sticky notes as reminders, or use a planner to structure your time and stay organized.
- **Learn to adopt a positive attitude.** Focusing on the positive things in your life can make your life better and may even improve your health. Try to accept changes when they occur, and keep problems in perspective.

Coping and support

Coping with a mental illness can be challenging. Talk to your doctor or therapist about improving your coping skills, and consider these tips:

- **Learn about your mental illness.** Include your family, too — this can help the people who care about you understand what you're going through and learn how they can help. Your doctor or therapist may provide information directly or may recommend classes, books or websites.
- **Join a support group.** Connecting with others facing similar challenges may help you cope. Support groups for mental illness are available in many communities and online. One good place to start is the National Alliance on Mental Illness.
- **Stay connected with friends and family.** Try to participate in social activities, and get together with family or friends regularly. Ask for help when you need it, and be upfront with your loved ones about how you're doing.
- **Keep a journal.** Keeping track of your personal life can help you and your mental health provider identify what triggers or improves your symptoms. It's also a healthy way to explore and express pain, anger, fear and other emotions.

Prevention

There's no sure way to prevent mental illness. However, if you have a mental illness, taking steps to control stress, to increase your resilience and to boost low self-esteem may help keep your symptoms under control. Follow these steps:

- **Pay attention to warning signs.** Work with your doctor or therapist to learn what might trigger your symptoms. Make a plan so that you know what to do if symptoms return.

Contact your doctor or therapist if you notice any changes in symptoms or how you feel. Consider involving family members or friends to watch for warning signs.

- **Get routine medical care.** Don't neglect checkups or skip visits to your family health care provider, especially if you aren't feeling well. You may have a new health problem that needs to be treated, or you may be experiencing side effects of medication.
- **Get help when you need it.** Mental health conditions can be harder to treat if you wait until symptoms get bad. Long-term maintenance treatment also may help prevent a relapse of symptoms.
- **Take good care of yourself.** Sufficient sleep, healthy eating and regular physical activity are important. Try to maintain a regular schedule. Talk to your provider if you have trouble sleeping or if you have questions about diet and exercise.

