



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
British Columbia  
*Mental health for all*

# what is a mental illness?

Part of the Plainer Language Series

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)





## what is a mental illness?

A mental illness is a real health problem that affects the mind. A mental illness changes the way you think, feel and act. These changes can be upsetting. Mental illness is not your fault. You can't just get over it on your own.

There are different kinds of mental illness. Each illness is different. We will talk about five types of mental illness:

1. Mood disorders
2. Anxiety disorders
3. Psychotic disorders
4. Eating disorders
5. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder



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## Mood disorders

Your mood is the way you feel. “Happy” and “sad” are two different moods that people feel. Your mood is affected by things that happen around you. When something good happens, you feel good. When something bad happens, you feel bad. These feelings do not usually last very long.

If you have a mood disorder, your mood becomes very strong and stays that way for a long time. You can’t control how you feel during these times.



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Two mood disorders you may know about are depression and bipolar disorder.

- **Depression**—Depression can start at any time in your life. Depression makes it hard to enjoy things. You feel sad, empty or hopeless most of the time. You may blame yourself for problems or think that things will never be good again. You may feel tired all the time. You may have a hard time concentrating. You may have problems with eating and sleeping. You may think you would be better off dead. Depression is not just a bad day.
- **Bipolar disorder**—Bipolar disorder is made up of two kinds of strong moods. Your mood changes from very high to very low. The low mood is like depression. The high mood is called mania. A person can have healthy times between the depression and the mania.

## What is mania?

Mania may make you feel very happy, irritated or angry. You have a lot of big ideas and big plans. It may feel like your thoughts are racing. You may speak so quickly that others can't understand you. You also have a lot of extra energy. You may feel like you do not need much sleep. When people have mania, they may do things they would not normally do.

**If you are thinking about ending your life, call 1-800-SUICIDE. It stands for 1-800-784-2433.**

**If you think that a loved one is in danger, call 9-1-1.**





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### Anxiety disorders

Anxiety is what we feel when we are scared. It is a normal reaction when we think that something bad might happen.

Anxiety disorders are different from normal anxiety. Anxiety disorders make you feel scared, even when you are safe. It is hard to control anxiety if you have an anxiety disorder.



There are many different kinds of anxiety disorders. Two that you may know about are OCD and PTSD.

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD**— OCD is made up of “obsessions” and “compulsions.” Obsessions are unwanted thoughts that do not go away. They make you feel upset or anxious. Compulsions are things you do to get rid of the anxiety. Compulsions take a lot of time and can make you change your daily routine.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD**— PTSD happens after a very scary event like a car accident. You may replay the event over and over in your mind. You may have a lot of anxiety around things that remind you of the event. You may try to avoid things that remind you of the event.

## Psychotic disorders

Psychotic disorders are mental illnesses that have a symptom called psychosis. Symptoms are caused by a health problem. They show you that something is wrong. For example, you may feel very tired when you catch a cold. Feeling tired is a symptom of the cold.

Psychosis means that you can't tell the difference between what is real and what is not real. A psychosis is made up of two parts. The first part is seeing or hearing things that are not really there. Most people who have a psychosis hear voices or sounds that are not real. The second part of psychosis is a strong belief in something that cannot be true. For example, you might believe that you have special powers or believe that someone else can read your thoughts.



One psychotic disorder you may have heard about is called schizophrenia.

- **Schizophrenia**—Psychosis is a big part of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia also changes the way you think. Schizophrenia makes it hard to think clearly, speak clearly, remember things, concentrate or get things done.

## Eating disorders

Eating disorders change the way you think about food and your body. You may believe you are bigger than you really are. You may think that you would be better if you were thinner. Some people with eating disorders do not eat enough to be healthy. Other people eat a lot at once and then get rid of the food from their bodies.

Eating disorders are about more than food. They may be a way to control things in your life. They may be a way to cope with difficult feelings.



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## Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or ADHD

There are three parts to ADHD.

1. Problems paying attention. It makes it hard to concentrate on one thing at a time or plan things. You might make a lot of careless mistakes or forget things you need.
2. Problems sitting still. This is also called “hyperactivity.” You might feel very restless and feel like you have to move around.
3. Problems controlling urges. You may act before you think or take a lot of risks.

ADHD starts when you are a child and can stay with you as an adult. Some people are not told that they have ADHD until they are adults.

## Where can I go for help?

The first person to talk to is your doctor.



Some health problems have signs that look like mental illnesses. Your doctor will see what else might be causing problems.

Your doctor may also ask to you see a mental health expert. This is usually a psychiatrist or psychologist. These experts have extra training in mental health.

## What happens next?

Mental illnesses can be treated. If your doctor or a mental health expert finds a mental illness, you will start treatment.

There are many different kinds of treatments for mental illnesses. Treatment will depend on the disorder and how it affects your life. It will also depend on your own wishes.

The main types of treatments are counselling, medication, support groups and self-care.



## Counselling

Counselling can be very helpful for different kinds of mental illnesses. You talk through problems with a counsellor. They help you learn new skills to deal with problems.

You work together until you can use the skills on your own. There are different kinds of counselling to help with different problems.

You can find a counsellor through your doctor, your school or your work. You can also learn skills in books, online or through support groups.

## Medication

When you have a mental illness, there may be changes in the chemicals in your brain. Medication helps deal with these changes.



There are different kinds of medications. Each medication works a bit differently. You will work with your doctor to find the best medication for you.

## Support groups

Support groups are places to meet with other people who are dealing with the same problem as you. You can share information, learn from others and support each other. There are many different kinds of support groups.

To find support groups in your community:

- Ask your doctor or counsellor.
- Contact your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association branch. You can find the contact information at [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca).



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### Self-care

Self-care means that you take care of yourself. You can do a lot of little things to help you get healthy and stay healthy. Here are some things to try:

- Try to get enough sleep every night. Sleep has a big part in the way we feel. When we are tired, it is hard to deal with problems or see the good side of things. Talk to your doctor if you cannot sleep well.
- Try to get some exercise every day. Exercise helps lift our mood and deal with anxiety. Even small changes, like walking to a different bus stop, can make a big difference.

- Try to eat well. Food is our fuel, so we feel better when we give ourselves healthy food.
- Avoid alcohol or other drugs. They might hide our feelings for a short time, but they often make us feel worse in the long run. They can also stop medication from working properly. If you having a hard time cutting back on your drinking or drug use, talk to your doctor or counsellor.
- Look for ways to lower stress. Yoga and meditation may help.



Talk to your doctor or counsellor for more self-care ideas.



## Developmental disabilities

Developmental disabilities affect the way you grow up. These changes make it hard to go about your daily life.

Most mental illnesses are not developmental disabilities. Mental illnesses can start at any time. The signs of a mental illness can go away. Developmental disabilities start when you are young and stay with you.

- **Autism**—Autism makes it hard to interact with others. You may have a hard time talking or using words. You may mix up words or use the wrong words. It makes it hard to tell people what you need. You may have a hard time understanding what others mean or what they need. There are other signs of autism, too. Some people avoid certain colours or certain foods. You may follow a strict schedule and may feel very upset if the schedule changes.
- **Fetal alcohol syndrome**—Fetal alcohol syndrome starts to affect babies before they are born. It happens when a mother drinks alcohol while she is pregnant. Alcohol hurts the baby's brain. Fetal alcohol syndrome affects the way you think, act and learn.



- **Down syndrome**—Down syndrome is caused by your genes. Genes are like your body's plan. For example, they say what colour your eyes are. Everyone has different genes, but most people have the same number of genes. People living with Down syndrome have extra genes. The extra genes change the way you learn and grow.
- **Learning disabilities**—A learning disability means that you may have problems listening, speaking, reading, writing, or doing math. It does not mean that you are not as smart as other people. Learning disabilities can be caused by many different things. They can be caused by illnesses or accidents that hurt your brain.

Some people have a developmental disability and a mental illness at the same time. For example, they might have depression and a learning disability.

## Where do I go from here?

Learn more about mental illness from these resources:



### Your local crisis line

A crisis line can help you when you are very upset. But they can help for a lot of other problems. They can help you find services in your community. You can also call if you just need to talk to someone. Call 310-6789. Do not put 604, 778 or 250 before the number. When you call 310-6789, you can talk to someone right away.

### BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for fact sheets and other useful information. You can learn more about mental health and substance use problems. You can read stories and connect with others. There are workbooks to help people with mental illnesses. There are three booklets: dealing with a diagnosis of a mental illness (when your doctor says you have a mental illness), working with your doctor, and preventing relapse of a mental illness. You can also learn more about mental health organizations in BC.

## **Bounce Back program**

Visit [www.bouncebackbc.ca](http://www.bouncebackbc.ca) for information on the Bounce Back program. Bounce Back is for people dealing with low mood, stress or anxiety. You learn skills from a DVD or you can talk to someone on the phone. The program is free. Talk to your doctor if you want to sign up for Bounce Back. Bounce Back is run by the Canadian Mental Health Association.

## **Developmental Disabilities Association**

Visit [www.develop.bc.ca](http://www.develop.bc.ca) to learn about the Developmental Disabilities Association. They help people in BC. They have programs for children, teenagers and youth. They can also help you find resources around BC.

# www.heretohelp.bc.ca

This booklet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. It is based on current research and resources. We also check key facts with doctors and other mental health experts. Please contact us if you want to know what resources we used.

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HeretoHelp is a project to the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are:

- AnxietyBC
- BC Schizophrenia Society
- Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division
- Centre for Addictions Research of BC
- FORCE Society for Kid's Mental Health
- Family Services of the North Shore, Jessie's Legacy Program
- Mood Disorders Association of BC

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