



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

tips for

getting help for mental illnesses

info sheets 2013 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



The best way to know if you might have a mental illness is if you're not feeling, thinking or acting like yourself.

IMAGINE THIS: One day, you develop a nagging cough, or get sharp back pain. Most of us wait a few days to see if things get worse or improve, then we might do some research on things we can do at home. We go to friends and family for advice. If the problem still doesn't go away on its own, we usually go to the doctor to get it checked out to find out what it is and what to do about it.

NOW IMAGINE THIS: One day, you wake up and realize that emotionally, you've been feeling different lately. You're not sure what it is, but you (or others) notice that you're acting differently, feeling unlike yourself and having thoughts that bother you. Two months later, you're feeling even getting worse, but you still haven't asked for help. You think it will go away on its own, that it's not serious, that it's all in your head. You reason that maybe it's just your personality or your age or stress. Things you might try on your own don't seem to help. Or maybe you suspect what it could be and you're scared of what family, friends and coworkers would say. So

you keep it to yourself and just try to get by day-to-day, hoping it will change.

Why do we treat our mental health so differently from our physical health?

How do I know if I need help?

There are many kinds of mental illnesses. Although mental illnesses have a lot in common with each other, each type is quite different. Symptoms of mental illness can look different from person to person. Just like physical illness, symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe and you don't have to show every possible symptom to

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how to talk to your doctor? p.r.e.p.a.r.e.

- **Plan:** Make a list of the main points you want to tell or learn from your doctor or health care provider.
- **Report:** During your visit, tell your doctor what you want to talk about.
- **Exchange Information:** Make sure you tell the doctor about what's wrong. Printing out an online screening tool, or bringing a diary you may have been keeping can help. Make sure to describe the impact your symptoms or side effects are having on your day-to-day life. Sometimes it can help to bring someone along for support and to help describe your behaviour and symptoms if you're unable to.
- **Participate:** Discuss with your doctor the different ways of handling your health problems. Make sure you understand the positive and negative features about each choice. Ask lots of questions.
- **Agree:** Be sure you and your doctor agree on a treatment plan you can live with.
- **Repeat:** Tell your doctor what you think you will need to take care of the problem.

Source: Institute for Healthcare Communication

have the illness. Probably the best way to know if you might have a mental illness is if you're not feeling, thinking or acting like yourself—or if people you care about notice changes in you like some of the following:

- I suddenly no longer have interest in activities I used to enjoy
- I find myself feeling angry or sad for little or no reason
- I have strange thoughts or voices that I can't seem to get rid of
- I used to be healthy, but now I always feel a bit sick
- I eat a lot more or less than I used to
- My sleep patterns have changed
- I feel fear, worry and terror about things in life that people around me seem to cope well with
- I've been missing more and more time from work or school
- I have a constant fear that someone is going to hurt me
- I've been drinking heavily or using drugs to cope
- I find myself avoiding people
- Sometimes I just want to end my life

Why should I get help?

In a Canadian mental health survey, only a third of us who had feelings and symptoms of a mental illness went to a professional for help. That means that most people (two-thirds) who had symptoms of mental illness didn't ask for help. There are a number of myths that prevent people from getting the help they need:

- **Myth:** *I just need to snap out of it, I can deal with this on my own.*
Fact: Mental illnesses are real illnesses—they are more than just the ups and downs of life—and like other illnesses they need to be treated. This doesn't mean you won't have an important role to play in your health, but part of taking care of yourself means getting professional attention when your life is being affected by your symptoms.
- **Myth:** *It's not serious enough to require help.*
Fact: Untreated mental illnesses are among the most disabling of all health problems in terms of lost potential and productivity, according to the World Health Organization. Suicide is so often linked to untreated mental illness, so mental illness must always be taken seriously.
- **Myth:** *If I go for help, the people I care about will judge me and think I'm "crazy" or weak.*
Fact: It's true that some people will find it easier or harder to ask for help. You may find it both useful and comforting to meet others going through what you are, so you can see for yourself that mental illness can affect anyone. If you'd like to help your family and friends learn more, there are lots of support groups and educational resources to help them understand what you're going through, as well as deal with their questions and worries. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It takes incredible strength and courage.



Mental illnesses are real illnesses—they are more than just the ups and downs of life—and like other illnesses they need to be treated

- **Myth:** *What's the point of getting help? Treatments don't work anyway.*

Fact: There has been great progress in the development of treatments for mental illness. There are a variety of well-researched and effective therapies available, from special kinds of counseling to medications, light therapy and other treatments. For example, 80% of people who have depression can be successfully treated.

As with so many other illnesses, early treatment is the key to recovering from mental illnesses. Early treatment can prevent a problem from getting worse. The sooner you do something about it, the sooner you'll be back to yourself. The national survey found that those who did get help for a mental illness were happy with the help they received.

Who can provide professional help?

Your family doctor—can rule out any other causes for your symptoms, prescribe medications, do limited counselling and refer you to a psychiatrist or other special services. For many people, family doctors are the main source of professional support for managing a mental illness. They are a good resource for information and a great place to start getting help.

Psychiatrists—are doctors specially trained in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses. They are covered under BC's Medical Services Plan (MSP), but you will need a referral from your family doctor or mental health program to see one. As with doctors, they can prescribe medications. Many psychiatrists also do counseling.

Counsellors—include psychologists, clinical counselors, and social workers. These professionals can help diagnose mental illnesses and provide counselling that can look at your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Counsellors are not doctors, so they can't prescribe medication. Counselling is usually not covered by MSP unless it's through a hospital program or mental health team. You may also be able to access low-cost counselling programs in your community.

Other sources of counselling:

- Schools and campuses provide counselling services to students.
- Many workplaces also offer counselling services through benefit programs like an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and through extended health coverage. EAP counsellors provide short-term counselling to deal with specific issues. Most EAP programs are for both the employee and the employee's family.

- If you belong to a certain group, you may have access to counselling through special services. For example, military veterans can access counselling through Veterans Affairs Canada. An Aboriginal person can access counselling through their Band, Friendship Centre, Aboriginal Mental Health program, or a branch of Health Canada. A member from a faith community may have access to a helpline or counsellor through the networks connected to their place of worship.

Mental health teams—are another resource. Most communities in BC have both an adult mental health team (or centre) as well as one for children and youth under 19. Mental health centres use teams of different kinds of professionals including social workers, nurses, mental health workers, peer support workers, occupational therapists, and others. Physicians often consult, as well. Mental health teams provide assessment and an ongoing connection for people with long-term mental illnesses. They can also provide life skills support and connection to other community assistance, such as income or housing. You can refer yourself, but centres appreciate a referral from a family doctor (and busier centres will require a referral). They are covered by MSP.

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where do I go from here?

How do I get the help I need?

If you are experiencing some of the symptoms in the “How do I know if I need help?” section then the next step is to look at your options.

- See a family doctor (also known as a general practitioner or GP) to rule out other explanations for symptoms you may be feeling. You can see a doctor through a walk-in clinic or by appointment through a family practice. If you don't have a family doctor and would like to find one, contact the BC College of Physicians and Surgeons for a list of doctors accepting patients at www.cpsbc.ca or 1-800-461-3008 (toll-free in BC) or 604-733-7758 (in Greater Vancouver). Available in English only.
- If you want to speak to a medical professional now, or and aren't sure if what you're feeling is mental or physical illness, call HealthLink BC at 811. HealthLink BC provides health information and advice. You can call from anywhere in the province 24-hours, and you can speak to a pharmacist from 5 pm

to 9 am every evening. Have your CareCard number ready. If you do not have a CareCard or don't want to give your CareCard number, you can still get service. If English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 130 languages are available.

- If you feel panicked, overwhelmed, or you're thinking of suicide and need help immediately, call 310-6789 (no area code needed in BC) to connect with a local crisis line without a wait or busy signal. Available in English only.

Other resources, available in English only, are:

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for info sheets and personal stories about mental health problems and mental illnesses. You'll also find more information, tips and self-tests to help you understand many different problems, and resources located around the province.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental illness.

Kelty Mental Health

Contact Kelty Mental Health at www.keltymentalhealth.ca or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.