



# It's Mental Health Week!

This year, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) presents *Mental Health Week* from May 5<sup>th</sup> to May 11<sup>th</sup>. CMHA is launching a *Be Mind Full* initiative — asking Canadians if they are 'fine or phine.' Too often people claim to be feeling fine when they do not, resulting in approximately seven million Canadians living with mental illness. Many do not seek treatment because of the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems.

To support the CMHA's initiatives we need to do more than build awareness around mental health issues. We need to start being 'mind full.'

Being 'mind full' requires you to understand the myths and truths that surround mental illness. It also means that you are able to recognize if you are affected by a mental illness and if you are, that you are not afraid admit it and to seek treatment for it. If you're being 'mind full' you can do your part to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health problems and reach out for the appropriate support.



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# Mental Illness Myth Busters!

**How much do you know about mental illness? It's time to dispel some common myths about mental illness in order to reduce the stigma associated with it.**

One out of every five Canadians is affected by some form of mental illness, at some point in their lives. Even with its relative prevalence, mental illness remains shrouded in stigma and dogged by misconceptions that have evolved into myths. More recently, people are opening up about their bouts of depression or other conditions, such as anxiety disorders. However, other mental illnesses like psychosis and schizophrenia often remain in the shadows.

In order to dispel the myths associated with mental illness, it is critical to understand what it is. A mental illness can be defined as a psychological pattern, potentially reflected in behaviour, that is generally associated with distress or disability, and which is not considered part of normal development.

There are different kinds of mental disorders — each characterized by different sets of symptoms that

affect how we think, feel, and behave. Symptoms can include depressed mood, extreme mood swings, disturbances in thought or perception, obsessions or fears, or other overwhelming feelings of anxiety. People with mental illness are often afraid to tell their friends or employers, for fear of being shunned by their families or face certain prejudices. Others are told to just “snap out of it.” However, mental illnesses can be treated, and often with excellent results.

Below are six common myths associated with mental illness, accompanied by the truths that dispel them.

## Common Mental Illness Myths

**Myth 1:**

**Mental illness is a single, rare disorder.**

Mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, impulse control disorders and addiction disorders are all mental illnesses. There are multiple types of mental illness, each with its own features and underlying causes. Each illness has its own approach to treatment.



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### Myth 2:

#### **People with a mental illness never get better.**

Treatments for mental illnesses are more numerous and more sophisticated now than ever before. As well, researchers continue to discover new treatments. Because of these advances, many people do recover, and others are able to keep conditions under control. Today's pharmaceutical treatments are better able to target the specific parts of the brain where treatment is needed. While some conditions might wax and wane in severity throughout a person's adult life, symptoms can be kept under control with proper treatment. Full recovery is attainable, and it may involve more than just drugs; it also may include being socially and physically active, because recovery means getting people back to 'leading normal lives.'

### Myth 3:

#### **Psychiatric disorders are not true illnesses. People who have a mental illness are just "crazy."**

Unlike a broken leg or heart attack (which are easily detected by simple tests), mental illness has traditionally been an invisible disease. This inability to see what's wrong adds to the perception, and even fear, of mental illness. But mental illnesses are bona fide medical conditions. They involve complex physiological processes, as well as changes or imbalances in brain chemistry.

### Myth 4:

#### **Children don't get mental illnesses. Their emotional problems are just part of growing up.**

Parents naturally want their children to do well, so some may brush off or explain away behavioural problems or other childhood difficulties as being mere growing pains. However, numerous psychiatric conditions, including depression, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety disorders, can and do occur in childhood. Roughly one in every 33 children and one in every eight teens suffer from depression.

### Myth 5:

#### **People with a mental illness lack intelligence.**

Intelligence has nothing to do with mental illness. On one hand, many people with mental disorders are brilliant, creative, productive people. On the other hand, some people with mental disorders are not brilliant or creative. Overall, the level of intelligence among people with mental illness likely parallels the patterns seen in any healthy population.

### Myth 6:

#### **People with a mental illness shouldn't have jobs. They'll just drag down the rest of the staff.**

People with mental illness can, and do function well in the workplace. They are unlikely to miss any more workdays because of their condition than people with a chronic physical condition such as diabetes or heart disease. Employees may not even be aware that a co-worker suffers from a mental illness. Similarly, a stress-ridden workplace may be a breeding ground for the development of stress-related mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety disorders, and threaten the delicate work-life balance. Mental illnesses are not just feelings or reactions to experiences or events. There are different kinds and each can be identified by a collection of different symptoms that persist for a specific period and significantly interfere with a person's roles, activities, relationships, and/or capacity for self-care.

Mental disorders can affect almost every aspect of a person's life over a considerable period. The more we know about them, the more able we are to dispel the myths and clear up the misconceptions surrounding them.



# Knowing Some Signs of Mental Illness

**Sometimes you need help — we all do. Know the possible signs of a mental illness so you know if you're being affected by one.**

There are many kinds of mental illnesses — some are quite alike and yet some are very different from each other. But it's important to understand that even though some may appear alike, each one is still very unique. Knowing if you have a mental illness is not always easy because symptoms vary with each person. If you notice changes in your thoughts or behaviour and/or others notice these changes too, you should take notice. While a single change in your behaviour or isolated event is not necessarily a sure sign of mental illness, multiple or severe symptoms may indicate a need for a medical evaluation. Some of these possible symptoms are listed below:

## Physical Changes

- Hyperactivity or inactivity
- Poor hygiene or personal care
- Unexplained weight gain or weight loss
- Oversleeping or being unable to sleep

## Changes in Mood

- Prolonged expressions of loss and hopelessness
- Loss of interest in hobbies or regular routine activities
- Extreme excitement or euphoria

## Changes in Behaviour

- Indifference, even in very important situations
- Inability to concentrate or cope with minor challenges
- Excessive drug or alcohol abuse
- Self-alienation or abnormal self-involvement
- Dropping out of activities or a sharp decline in academic or athletic performance
- Unexplained anger or frustration



Often the symptoms of mental illness vary in severity. Their duration will vary too — some people are affected for a few weeks or months while for others the illness may last for much longer. A thorough examination should be the first step when mental illness is suspected. If you're not feeling like yourself, contact a qualified professional.

# Getting the Help You Need so You can be at Your Best

**Don't be afraid to seek out the support you need. Recognize the symptoms and begin your road to recovery.**

Unfortunately, many people with a mental illness do not receive the treatment they need. In many cases, it is their own beliefs that prevent them from seeking help — beliefs based on their own fears, biases or stereotypes. Some of these beliefs are noted below, along with some explanations for why they may be a detriment to coping with a mental illness.

**"I don't need to get help. I'm not crazy."**

We need to normalize illnesses that have historically been hidden and ignored. When we speak about our experiences of mental illness, we help to remove the internalized shame that is associated with mental illness. All of us have the potential to heal, or at least to manage, our challenges and lead a full life. In order to do that however, we need to cast aside the doubt or prejudices of others and even ourselves. Having a mental illness doesn't make you 'crazy.' If you'd like to learn more, there is an abundance of resources available to help you understand what you may be going through and help answer some of your questions. The first step is reaching out for help.

**"I just need to get over it. I can deal with this on my own."**

Mental disorders are illnesses and like any illness, they need to be treated. It's true that you have an important role to play in your own health and wellbeing, but when your life is being affected by your symptoms, it's better to understand that getting better doesn't have to mean doing it all by yourself.

**"I'm fine. What I'm dealing with isn't that bad."**

According to the World Health Organization, untreated mental illnesses are among the most disabling of all health problems in terms of lost potential and productivity. It may or may not be serious, but if you're unsure it's better to talk with someone about it to determine if what you're feeling is really affecting your life. If so, it's probably time to get help.

If you're feeling mentally unwell, it's important to understand that the sooner you get the help you need, the sooner you'll be back to feeling like yourself again. Try not to downplay your symptoms or convince yourself that what's happening isn't that big of a deal. Mental illnesses are serious and require the appropriate attention. Have the conversation, know the facts, get to know yourself and reach out for the help you need. Don't be afraid to be who you are.

For more information on Mental Health Week 2014, please visit <http://www.cmha.ca>. For additional information on mental illness, contact your family physician or your Assistance Program.



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