

# FACT SHEET #1

# UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

*"Just because you don't understand it, doesn't mean it isn't so."*

Anonymous

Mental health conditions are real and medically recognised illnesses. Unfortunately, mental health issues are still often feared and misunderstood. However, we can reduce this stigma through learning more about it and supporting people in helpful and constructive ways. This means that if you experience a mental health issue personally, with family or friends, or a work colleague, you will have accurate and helpful knowledge to manage it appropriately.

This Fact Sheet will provide you with definitions for important mental health terms and explore some common myths about mental health conditions.

## KEY TERMS

- Mental Health**

A person's sense of good physical, psychological, and social health and wellbeing. We typically say someone is 'mentally healthy' if they are realising their potential, able to form positive relationships, function constructively in their community, and can cope positively with life's challenges.
- Mental Illness**

The general term used for a group of illnesses which significantly and persistently affects how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. These patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours typically have a negative impact on a person's overall health and happiness, and capacity to function in day-to-day life. Depression and anxiety are examples of mental illness. We can think of mental illness being like any other health issue such as diabetes or heart disease, and understand that it is real and treatable. Mental illness has both physical symptoms such as "being tired" or "having a headache", and psychological symptoms such as feeling "down" or "worried".
- Mental Health Problem**

When an individual is having some difficulties with their thoughts, feelings and behaviours which is having a negative impact on their ability to function at their best, but not to the degree of a diagnosable mental illness. An individual experiencing a mental health problem may recover quickly and return to their regular level of functioning, or may go on to develop a temporary or long term mental illness.
- Mental Health Condition**

The generic and common term often used to describe that someone is experiencing an illness or problem with their mental health.
- Having a Rough Patch**

A brief rough patch that is to be expected under specific circumstances where an individual may be acting a bit out of character, but not for any lengthy period of time (usually no more than a couple of weeks) or great extent given the circumstances. Signs and symptoms are not to the degree of either a mental illness or mental health problem.

# MYTHBUSTERS

Unfortunately, there are a lot of misconceptions about mental health conditions. This misunderstanding perpetuates negative attitudes and stigma towards people with a mental health condition. When individuals are operating off accurate information and are supportive towards others who may be struggling, this will have a significant and powerful effect on a person's wellbeing and recovery.



## **MYTH - People with a mental health condition are violent.**

**FACT** - Research tells us that people living with a mental health condition are no more violent or dangerous than the rest of the population. In fact, people living with a mental health condition are more likely to be victims of violence or self-harm than to hurt anyone else.

## **MYTH - Mental health conditions are a result of personal weakness.**

**FACT** - Mental health issues are caused by genetic, environmental, biological, social, and environmental determinants. Experiencing an acute or chronic mental health condition is not the result of a character flaw. In fact, it takes great courage and strength for someone to admit they are struggling and to seek help.

## **MYTH - All mental health conditions are essentially the same.**

**FACT** - There are many types of mental health conditions. They are distinguished by clearly defined symptom profiles. People who have the same mental health condition will have a unique set of causes and symptoms. Mental health conditions will typically have a combination of psychological (thoughts and feelings) and physical (e.g., insomnia, weight gain or loss, increase or loss of energy, chest pain or nausea) indicators.

## **MYTH - Individuals with a mental health condition just need to learn better coping skills.**

**FACT** - When an individual is struggling with their mental health, it is not as simple as just getting better at managing stress. Mental health conditions are real and complex issues.

Learning coping skills and implementing other psychological and life style strategies usually forms part of an effective treatment and management solution and has been shown to significantly assist individuals with mental health conditions. However, it is not helpful to dismiss the issue as "just learn better coping skills".

## **MYTH - Once someone has a mental health condition, they have it for the rest of their lives.**

**FACT** - Effective support and treatment can make a significant positive difference to full recovery and ongoing management of mental health conditions. This is particularly so if a person receives help early. Many people with a mental illness delay seeking help because they fear stigma and discrimination. Reducing stigma will encourage more people to seek help early. Though some people experience significant disability as a result of a chronic mental health condition, most live full and productive lives as they recover or while they receive ongoing treatment.

If you or someone you know needs help contact **TIACS** on 0488 846 988 or your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your GP or call: **LifeLine** on 13 11 14, **Kids Helpline** on 1800 551 800, **MensLine Australia** on 1300 789 978 or the **Suicide Call Back Service** on 1300 659 467.