



Registered Charity no. 1085491

Local offices:
01992 586969 – Hertford
01442 253344 – Hemel Hempstead
01462 456660 – Hitchin

contact@carersinherts.org.uk
www.carersinherts.org.uk

Factsheet MH1 What is mental illness?

Definition

Mental illness is when an individual has difficulties with their feelings, thinking and observations of the world for either a short period or over some time. These difficulties may result in the person having problems relating to or communicating with other people. They may become withdrawn, struggle to make a decision, neglect their hygiene or lose confidence with things that they would have previously taken in their stride. It may mean that they find work or leisure activities very difficult and could result in them losing their ability to enjoy life. *Mental illness* is often not a permanent condition but can affect every aspect of a person's life. It is a common illness which one in four of us will likely be effected by at some stage in our life especially if we are experiencing a period of stress.

Severe mental illness is a term that is used for people who have a longstanding condition causing them to have significant problems in one or more areas of their life for example relationships, employment or caring for themselves. There are many different types of mental illness. Most conditions can be classed as *neurotic* or *psychotic* described in fact sheet 2. But also there are other conditions called *personality disorder*, *organic disorder* and *mental illness caused by the use of illicit drugs* described in fact sheet 3.

Frequently asked questions

Is someone with a mental illness violent or dangerous?

It is a stereotype that a person with a mental illness is violent, dangerous or has no control over their behaviour. Only a very small number of people with mental illness are violent and are more likely to harm or neglect themselves. Many individuals who commit suicide have a mental illness which may or may not have been recognised by other people.

Is mental illness the same as learning disabilities (mental handicap)?

Mental illness is very different to learning disability (what used to be known as mental handicap) and should not be confused. A person has a learning disability as a result of permanent or irreversible damage to the brain at birth or before the brain had fully developed.

What causes mental illness?

It is not entirely known. Many illnesses are as a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain and can be brought on by stress or illicit drug use. There may be a genetic link causing a person to be more vulnerable to developing a mental illness but this has yet to be proved.

What can I do if I believe someone I know has developed a mental illness?

Ask the person to visit their GP to explain their experiences and how they are feeling. The sooner they do this the better. If the person suddenly becomes unwell and they are not able to see their GP it is advisable to take them to Accident & Emergency and ask to see the duty psychiatrist or a mental health worker.

Where can I go for more information?

MIND (for comprehensive information on all mental illnesses) 15-19 Broadway London E15 4BQ Tel: 0845 766 0163
www.mind.org.uk

Making Space (a charity based in the north of the country who provide good online information) www.makingspace.co.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk

RETHINK Royal London House 22-25 Finsbury Square London EC2A 1DX Tel: 020 8974 6814 (10am-3pm Monday-Friday) www.rethink.org