

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Parents : Mental Health Problems

**Mental health problems are very common. These days there are treatments, help and support available for most mental health problems.**

### What is mental illness?

People who have a serious mental illness think, feel or behave in ways that are mixed up. They often don't have much control over their feelings, thinking or behaviour. They can't seem to get on with school or work and don't seem able to enjoy their relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Most people feel stressed and depressed when they are trying to cope with difficult life problems.

However, there are times when some people are unable to stop feeling sad, lost or confused and they start thinking and acting in ways that are unhealthy. This is when we say in western culture that they may have **mental health problems or in more serious cases, a mental illness.**

### How many people have a mental health problem?

Research suggests almost half of adult Australians will experience mental health problems at some time in their life.<sup>2</sup> The problems may last for a short time and only occur once or may go on for years.

Most people get better. Others can learn to cope better with their symptoms but will always have them.

Mental health problems are found more often in:

- young people who use drugs and alcohol heavily.
- young people who start using drugs and alcohol at a very young age.
- unemployed people.
- people who are homeless.
- people who have been in jail.<sup>3</sup>

### Signs of Illness

A young person who has mental health problems might have one or more of the following symptoms:

- They may be feeling deep sadness and often seem depressed.
- They might be anxious and worried all the time.
- They may be hearing voices that aren't real.
- They may be unable to get out of bed or leave the house most days.
- They might have stopped taking care of themselves – not bathing, not eating or dressing properly.
- They might do the same thing over and over again – such as washing hands or checking door locks.
- They might have trouble sleeping and feel tired all the time.

### Get help

If your child has had any of these symptoms for some time, then you should talk to a doctor or a school welfare officer about it.

People from non-English speaking backgrounds often put up with the mental health problems for a long time before they seek help.<sup>4</sup>

It is better to get help early than wait until the problems are worse and more difficult to treat.

### What Causes Mental Illness?

Mental illness usually develops because of a number of factors. A young person may have:

- A family member who has had a mental illness.
- Experienced some trauma in their lives.
- A chemical imbalance in the brain.
- Started using drugs or alcohol heavily.

A combination of some or all of these factors may have contributed to the onset of their symptoms of mental illness.

<sup>1</sup> The Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre, What is Mental illness?, <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/qtmhc/docs/mi-eng.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Aust. Bureau of Statistics, National Survey of Mental Health & Wellbeing 2007

<sup>3</sup> Aust. Bureau of Statistics, National Survey of Mental Health & Wellbeing 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Kiroopoulos, L. 'Managing Mental Illness in Patients from CALD backgrounds', *Psychiatry Clinical Practice*, 2005.

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### Types of Mental Illness

There are many different types of mental illnesses such as:

- clinical depression
- bi-polar disorder
- schizophrenia
- anxiety disorders
- eating disorders
- personality disorder

For detailed information on these disorders in a range of languages, see: Multicultural Mental Health Australia's website [www.mmha.org.au](http://www.mmha.org.au).

### Is it their fault?

In some cultures it is thought that mental illnesses are caused by bad blood or that it is a punishment or curse.

It is important to understand that **it is not the young person's fault that they are having these problems** and they should not be blamed. This will only make things worse. They need understanding and help to get suitable treatment.

### What will people think?

Family members sometimes think that the unwell person should just 'snap out of it' and get on with life. They might think it will bring shame on the family. This attitude is not helpful. It isn't possible to get over serious mental health problems without help.

It is important for family members to put the unwell family member first and seek help for them.

### Treatment

#### What will happen to my child?

In the old days people with a serious mental illness were locked away in institutions. This does not happen in countries like Australia anymore.

If a young person is sick, your doctor will provide treatment or will refer your child to a psychiatrist, a psychologist or a mental health clinic.

They will try to keep the young person at home and provide treatment and support for them there.

Or if the young person is seriously ill, they will be sent to a hospital near their home until they are well enough to return home.

### Confidentiality

Doctors and mental health workers are not allowed to tell other people about your child's problems without yours and your child's permission.

### Always ask for an Interpreter if you need one

Some doctor's clinics and mental health clinics have bilingual workers. All clinics should arrange for an interpreter if you or your child needs one.

Don't be embarrassed to ask for an interpreter if you think you might need one. It is better to fully understand what is happening with your child than leave a clinic or hospital confused.

### Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CAT Team)

These teams operate 24 hours a day out of major public hospitals. They are groups of mental health professionals who assist people who are in crisis with mental illness problems - including people who are close to suicide.

They can visit the sick person in their home and arrange for the person to go to hospital if necessary.

If your child has a mental health problem and is at risk of hurting themselves or others or of suicide you should call **000** or the CAT team at your local hospital.

### Alternatives to Medical Help

Some people try different ways to help heal the symptoms of their child's mental illness such as:

- Prayer.
- Changing their child's school.
- Moving house.
- Consulting a spiritual healer.
- Consulting a naturopath or a herbalist.

It is a good idea to consult a doctor as well as trying different ways to heal your child's health. If your child has a serious mental illness they are going to need medical treatment to get better or to control the symptoms.

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### → Tips from this Fact Sheet

- Many people recover from mental health problems with time and treatment. Others learn to cope better with care and support.
- People who have a mental illness often don't have much control over their feelings, thinking or behaviour. They can't just 'snap out of it'.
- It is important to understand that it is not the young person's fault that they are having these problems. They should not be blamed.
- If your child has a mental health problem and is at risk of hurting themselves or others or of suicide you should call 000 or the CAT team at your local hospital.

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### → Useful resources

**LifeLine**  
Tel: 13 1114

**CrisisLine**  
Tel: 1800 019 116

**Police/Emergency Services**  
Tel: 000

**Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CAT Team)** Call your local public hospital

**Orygen Youth Health**  
A youth mental health service  
Tel: 1800 888 320

**Foundation House – The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc** provides torture and trauma counselling for individuals and families in metropolitan and rural areas of Victoria  
Tel: (03) 9388 0022  
Web: [www.foundationhouse.org.au](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au)

**Multicultural Mental Health Australia**  
Web: [www.mmha.org.au/mmha](http://www.mmha.org.au/mmha)

**Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit**  
[www.vtpu.org.au/resources/translatedmh](http://www.vtpu.org.au/resources/translatedmh)

### → Related Fact Sheets

- Adolescent Development.
- Settling into a new country
- Getting the Right Help.
- What are Complex Problems?