

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a nation-wide, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. For more information about the CMHA and our services, please go to www.cmha.ca

Myths About Mental Illness



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Studies indicate that in any given year, one in every five Canadian adults under age 65 will have a mental health problem. Indirectly, all Canadians are affected by mental health issues because we know someone in the family, a friend or fellow worker who has an illness. The financial impact of mental illness costs our economy billions of dollars every year due to lost productivity, sick time and health system expenses; the social impact is staggering in terms of human pain, suffering and despair.

In spite of these startling facts, most people know very little about mental

illness aside from what the media tells us, or from word of mouth. Twenty per cent of the people in our communities experience mental illness at some time – isn't it time we learned the truth about these conditions and separated fact from fiction?

Ten Common Myths

Let's start by examining some of the more common myths.

Myth #1: Mental illness means that guy is crazy; he isn't really sick. A little self-control and discipline is all he needs to get his life straightened out. We all go through tough times, but we manage. What makes him so different?

Fact: Ongoing research points to a complex combination of genetics, biology, physical and social environments as the main contributors to mental illness. There is no simple answer but we can say that the brain and the body interact in ways that play a part in the symptoms. In

addition, lifestyle, family environment, economic status, substance abuse, stress levels and trauma can influence the onset, or relapse of symptoms.

When someone breaks a leg we know they are injured because they are hobbling around with a cast and crutches. We wouldn't expect them to run a marathon by "exerting a little self-control" or blame them if they were unable to walk without their crutches. Someone with a mental illness is as injured as the person with a broken leg; they just don't wear a cast signaling the disability.

Mental illness is not a matter of a person "straightening up". Many mental illnesses are treatable medical conditions and a combination of therapy, medication and support can be very effective.

Myth #2: Addictions to drugs and alcohol are the result of a lack of willpower.

Fact: Not true. Once again, research has shown that addictions are the result of a number of factors. Genetics, the environment (for example, family or friends), and perhaps an existing mental illness such as depression (called a concurrent disorder) can all contribute to an addictive habit.

People who are addicted to substances change the way their bodies sense pleasure. When an addicted person is not using drugs or alcohol,

their biological and chemical processes are not satisfied, resulting in an overwhelming craving. The urges are not only emotional, but physical. It takes a great deal of effort, therapy and medication to overcome all of the influences that led to the addiction; it is certainly not just a matter of exerting a little willpower.

Myth #3: Mentally ill people have lower intelligence and are poorer than the rest of the population.

Fact: Absolutely not true. Mental illness has no bias for a particular intelligence level, socioeconomic status, location, education, culture, religion, or gender. It can strike anyone, anywhere. No one is immune. It is true that untreated mental illness can interrupt a person's life path and employment opportunities; that is why early assessment and therapy are so important.

Myth #4: Bad parenting causes mental illness.

Fact: We want to say again that mental illness is a complicated condition that arises from a combination of genetics, biology and environment. Experts agree that many mental illnesses have an underlying medical condition that is treatable with medication, therapy and support. Families do play a big role in helping with the recovery process.

Myth #5: People with mental illnesses are violent and dangerous. Look at what the media has been telling us; it's no wonder people are scared when they encounter someone who seems crazy.

Fact: This fear has more to do with the media than it does with reality. The truth is that there is very little incentive for the media to cover stories about non-violent people with mental illness. However, statistics show that as a group, those with mental illness are no more violent than any other group in the population. If anything, people with mental illnesses suffer more as victims of violence than the public at large due to the secondary effects of poverty, transient lifestyle and substance use problems.

Myth #6: If a person has schizophrenia, they have multiple personalities. I've seen movies that prove this is true.

Fact: Don't allow Hollywood to shape your understanding of schizophrenia; it is not a disease of multiple personalities. Schizophrenia is a chronic (lifelong) brain disease that affects a person's ability to understand what is real and what is not. As a result, people with schizophrenia can have psychotic episodes where they experience hallucinations, delusions and paranoia, however proper treatment can relieve these

symptoms and prevent relapses. A person who experiences multiple personalities has a rare condition called "multiple personality disorder".

Myth #7: Electrical shock therapy is like torture. It is inhumane, outdated and completely ineffective. It must be used for punishing people rather than helping them.

Fact: Some movies made years ago certainly support this view. However, research shows that electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is very effective in helping certain kinds of depression that are unresponsive to other methods. During ECT, patients are asleep under anaesthetic and muscle relaxants are given prior to treatment. When they awaken, patients have no recollection of the therapy.

Myth #8: Once you are diagnosed with a mental illness, you are crazy for the rest of your life.

Fact: If you have diabetes, are you unable to lead a normal life? Of course not. With proper treatment and a healthy lifestyle, people with a physical disease such as diabetes live full, rich lives. Mental illnesses are also treatable conditions. With a thorough assessment, appropriate treatment and support, people with a mental illness can – and do – lead happy, productive lives.

Myth #9: All people get depressed as they grow older; it is part of the aging process.

Fact: Let us be very clear about this myth – it is not true. Depression is not an inevitable part of aging. Neither is it normal for an older person to lose interest in activities that they used to enjoy; experience excessive sleep disturbances; or suffer from an inexplicable lack of energy. If an older person you know is showing any these signs, they may actually be depressed. Seek professional help to determine if depression or some other issue is behind these troubles.

Myth #10: People with a mental illness cannot hold down a job. It is also unfair to the other employees to be around someone who is mentally ill because they are afraid of upsetting that person. This makes for a very stressful environment for everyone.

Fact: The incidence of people taking time off work due to mental illness is no higher than it is for people with any chronic disease such as diabetes. In fact, most people are unaware that a co-worker has a mental illness and no special arrangements need to be made. A bigger concern for employers should be whether or not the workplace is a stressful environment. Stress-filled jobs are incubators for triggering mental illnesses

such as anxiety disorders and depression, and contributing to other health problems such as heart disease.

Socially conscious employers support their employees by reducing workplace stressors and helping those who are recovering from a mental illness by hiring, or re-integrating them into the workplace.

Prejudice and Discrimination

These myths, and many more, alienate people with mental illness from the rest of society. By perpetuating them, we discriminate against those with mental illness, causing them to feel isolated and humiliated. If our society is to reduce the impact of these diseases on our communities, we need to know the facts and change our own behaviour.

What can you do to help?

STOP the prejudice.

Attitudes must change before behaviour can change. Step back and become mindful of erroneous thoughts and opinions that perpetuate the myths around mental illness – and then correct them. You can make a difference in dismantling the stigma that exists today.

To build your own awareness, ask yourself the questions below. Are you doing the following things to people with mental illness?

- S Stereotyping?**
- T Trivializing or belittling their health challenges?**
- O Offending someone with your attitude?**
- P Patronizing people with mental health challenges because you unconsciously believe you are “better” than them?**

First, be aware of your own thoughts and if they are inaccurate or discriminatory, correct them. Learn the truth about mental illness from reliable sources such as the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Second, be aware of what others say about mental health issues and take the opportunity to correct the myths. Don't let misconceptions perpetuate stigma.

Finally, be aware of public sources that keep the stigmas around mental health alive. The media in particular, can be a breeding ground for fiction over fact – if you see or hear something that is untrue – call or write and constructively help the source to understand the truth.

Silence gives consent to prejudice and discrimination. Don't be part of the silent majority – use your voice for change.