



Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Centre de toxicomanie et de santé mentale

About mental health and mental health problems

What is mental health?

Mental health involves finding a balance in all aspects of your life — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It is the ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges you face every day — whether that involves making choices and decisions, adapting to and coping in difficult situations or talking about your needs and desires.

Just as your life and circumstances continually change, so do your moods and thoughts, and your sense of well-being. It's important to find balance in your life over time and in a range of situations. It's natural to feel off balance at times: for example, sad, worried, scared or suspicious. But these kinds of feelings may become a problem if they get in the way of your daily life over a long period.

What contributes to mental health problems?

There are many beliefs why people have mental health problems. Scientific studies suggest that many serious mental health problems involve biochemical disturbances in the brain. Professionals also believe that various psychological, social and environmental factors affect your well-being. As well, mental health is affected by the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual parts of your life. Stress can affect how you cope in any or all of these areas and can make it harder to manage day-to-day activities. You may have difficulty coping because you lack new skills and information that could help you.

You may be struggling with such difficulties as

- going through a divorce
- dealing with the death of a loved one
- having a car accident
- coping with a physical health problem
- growing up in a war-torn country, leaving the country you came from or adjusting to a new country (which often means dealing with immigration and resettlement experiences)
- dealing with racism or other forms of prejudice (because of sexual orientation, age, religion, culture, class, etc.)
- having a low income or being homeless
- not having equal access to education, work and health care
- having a history of mental health problems in the family or
- being a victim of violence, abuse or other trauma.

Your mental health can also be affected by how much love, support and acceptance you receive from family and others.

It is important to know that not all cultures view mental health in the same way. For example, in some countries, people who have schizophrenia are seen as having special powers and insights.

Alcohol and other drug use do not usually cause a mental health problem. However, they are often used to help cope with the problem. And they can make the mental health problem worse.

You and your health care provider need to work together to identify the problem, what may have caused or contributed to your difficulties and how you can be helped. Whatever the cause, you should know that mental health problems are not your fault. No one chooses to have a problem.

Types of mental health problems

Mental health problems often take different shapes and forms at different times.

Some people feel depressed. Others feel anxious and fearful. A child might act out in class or avoid others. Some don't eat much. Others overeat. Some depend on alcohol or other drugs to numb their painful feelings. Still others lose touch with reality. For example, they may hear voices, see things that aren't there or believe things that aren't true. Some have suicidal thoughts — and some act on these thoughts. Some feel angry and aggressive. And some people are traumatized because of a single event, such as a serious car accident. or because of a more long-term problem, such as years of being abused as a child. Many people have more than one of these problems at a time.

For many years, we thought mental health problems would either keep coming back or would never go away. We now know that many people recover from these challenges. Many people with mental health problems get better by using their own strength and resilience, the support of family and friends, psychotherapy, techniques to lessen their stress and possibly medication.

Some people may be relieved to know how doctors identify their problems. They may be glad to get a diagnosis that provides a theory about what's wrong and suggestions for how their problems could be treated. But others may not find it helpful to know a diagnosis. They may see it as a label or category that doesn't describe their situation. Or they may believe that their condition is due to difficult life situations rather than an illness.

In truth, some people are wrongly diagnosed and then given the wrong kind of treatment. Sometimes their mental health diagnosis changes so many times over the years that they lose confidence in the system. However, others find that an accurate diagnosis helps them choose the right treatment and results in the best care.

Where to get help or more information:

McLaughlin Addiction and Mental Health Information Centre

1 800 463 6273

In Toronto 416 595 6111

Your local Public Health Unit – look in the blue pages of your local telephone directory or call 411.

Your local Community Information Centre – look in the blue pages of your local telephone directory or call 411.

Your local Settlement Services

www.settlement.org

www.ocasi.org

www.camh.net

www.211Toronto.ca

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