

Mental health, mental illness

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Mental health and mental illness are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. This article will help you differentiate these two concepts, understand who is affected by mental illness, and what causes mental illness and substance use problems.

Mental health and mental illness: what's the difference?

Mental health is a concept similar to “physical health”: it refers to a state of well-being. Mental health includes our emotions, feelings of connection to others, our thoughts and feelings, and being able to manage life's highs and lows.

The presence or absence of a mental illness is not a predictor of mental health; someone without a mental illness could have poor mental health, just as a person with a mental illness could have excellent mental health. Problematic substance use is sometimes linked to poor mental health or mental illness; it can be a coping strategy for untreated trauma, pain, challenging thoughts or emotions, or other health symptoms.

Who is affected?

Everyone has mental health and will experience challenges regarding their mental well-being, but not everyone will experience a mental illness.

Mental illness indirectly affects all Canadians at some time either through their own experience, or that of a family member, friend or colleague.

In any given year, one in five people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness.

By age 40, about 50 per cent of the population will have or have had a mental illness.

Mental illness affects people of all ages, education, income levels, and cultures; however, systemic inequalities such as racism, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, colonial and gender-based violence, among others, can worsen mental health and symptoms of mental illness, especially if mental health supports are difficult to access.

What causes mental illness and substance use problems?

Mental illnesses are caused by a complex interplay of genetic, biological, personality and environmental factors. Life events such as violence and trauma during childhood or adulthood can give rise to mental health and substance use problems if supports for recovery are not available or sought.

Environmental factors play an important role in our mental health: access to safe and affordable housing, meaningful education and employment, leisure activities, the support of a community, access to land and nature, freedom from violence, and good access to health care and mental health services all support good mental health.

Stigma and discrimination attached to mental illnesses and substance use problems present a serious barrier not only to diagnosis and treatment but also to access to employment, housing, and other basic necessities.

Stigma both creates and deepens social marginalization.

In conclusion, one good thing to remember is that the symptoms of mental illnesses can be treated and very often managed effectively; with the right supports, people with mental illnesses can thrive. Do not hesitate to seek out support if you need it.

Do you need more help?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

The information provided is not a substitute for professional advice. If you need advice, please consult a qualified health care professional. For further information or if you want to access our services at CMHA, please call 1-800-493-8271 or visit our web site at www.cmha-east.on.ca