

## Myths About Mental Illness

Mental illnesses affect everyone in some way. We all likely know someone who has experienced a mental illness at some point. Yet there are still many hurtful attitudes around mental illnesses that fuel stigma and discrimination and make it harder to reach out for help. It's time to look at the facts.

### Ten Common Myths

Here are ten common myths about mental illnesses.

#### **Myth #1: Mental illnesses aren't real illnesses.**

**Fact:** The words we use to describe mental illnesses have changed greatly over time. What hasn't changed is the fact that mental illnesses are not the regular ups and downs of life. Mental illnesses create distress, don't go away on their own, and are real health problems with effective treatments. When someone breaks their arm, we wouldn't expect them to just "get over it." Nor would we blame them if they needed a cast, sling, or other help in their daily life while they recovered.

#### **Myth #2: Mental illnesses will never affect me.**

**Fact:** All of us will be affected by mental illnesses. Researchers estimate that as many as one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year. You may not experience a mental illness yourself, but it's very likely that a family member, friend, or co-worker will experience challenges.

#### **Myth #3: Mental illnesses are just an excuse for poor behaviour.**

**Fact:** It's true that some people who experience mental illnesses may act in ways that are unexpected or seem strange to others. We need to remember that the illness, not the person, is behind these behaviours. No one chooses to experience a mental illness. People who experience a change in their behaviour due to a mental illness may feel extremely embarrassed or ashamed around others. It's also true that people with a history of a mental illness are like anyone else: they may make poor choices or do something unexpected for reasons unrelated to symptoms of their illness.

#### **Myth #4: Bad parenting causes mental illnesses.**

**Fact:** No one factor can cause mental illnesses. Mental illnesses are complicated conditions that arise from a combination of genetics, biology, environment, and life experiences. Family members and loved ones do have a big role in support and recovery.

#### **Myth #5: People with mental illnesses are violent and dangerous.**

**Fact:** Some people try to predict violence so they know what to avoid. However, the causes of violence are complicated. Researchers agree that mental illnesses are not a good predictor of violence. In fact, if we look at mental illnesses on their own, people who

experience a mental illness are no more violent than people without a mental illness. Excluding people from communities *is* linked to violence. And people with mental illnesses are often among those who are excluded. It's also important to note that people who experience mental illnesses are much more likely to be victims of violence than to be violent.

**Myth #6: People don't recover from mental illnesses.**

**Fact:** People can and do recover from mental illnesses. Today, there are many different kinds of treatments, services, and supports that can help. No one should expect to feel unwell forever. The fact is, people who experience mental illnesses can and do lead productive, engaged lives. They work, volunteer, or contribute their unique skills and abilities to their communities. Even when people experience mental illnesses that last for a long time, they can learn how to manage their symptoms so they can get back to their goals. If someone continues to experience many challenges, it may be a sign that different approaches or supports are needed.

**Myth #7: People who experience mental illnesses are weak and can't handle stress.**

**Fact:** Stress impacts well-being, but this is true for everyone. People who experience mental illnesses may actually be better at managing stress than people who haven't experienced mental illnesses. Many people who experience mental illnesses learn skills like stress management and problem-solving so they can take care of stress before it affects their well-being. Taking care of yourself and asking for help when you need it are signs of strength, not weakness.

**Myth #8: People who experience mental illnesses can't work.**

**Fact:** Whether you realize it or not, workplaces are filled with people who have experienced mental illnesses. Mental illnesses don't mean that someone is no longer capable of working. Some people benefit from changes at work to support their goals, but many people work with few supports from their employer. Most people who experience serious mental illnesses want to work but face systemic barriers to finding and keeping meaningful employment.

**Myth #9: Kids can't have a mental illness like depression. Those are adult problems**

**Fact:** Even children can experience mental illnesses. In fact, many mental illnesses first appear when a person is young. Mental illnesses may look different in children than in adults, but they are a real concern. Mental illnesses can impact the way young people learn and build skills, which can lead to challenges in the future. Unfortunately, many children don't receive the help they need.

**Myth #10: Everyone gets depressed as they grow older. It's just part of the aging process.**

**Fact:** Depression is never an inevitable part of aging. Older adults may have a greater risk of depression because they experience so many changes in roles and social networks. If an older adult experiences depression, they need the same support as anyone else.

These myths – and many more – exclude people with mental illnesses from our communities and create barriers to well-being. If we want to reduce the impact of mental illnesses on our communities, we need to learn the facts and start with our own assumptions and behaviours.

### **What can I do about it?**

Changing attitudes and behaviours takes time, and it might seem like one person can't possibly make a difference. Actually, we can all find small ways to help.

First, we can all think about where our information comes from. News stories, TV shows, movies, and other media don't necessarily give you the whole story. These stories are usually sensational or shocking because that's what sells – but they don't necessarily represent most people's experiences. Thinking critically about where our information comes from can help us separate sensational stories from balanced points of view.

Second, we can all support laws and practices in our communities that stop discrimination against people with mental illnesses and promote inclusion.

Third, we can all spend time with people who experience mental illnesses to share and learn from each other. This is best when everyone is in an equal position of power. Volunteering with a community organization is a great way to connect with others.