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mental illness
fellowship victoria

*mi*fact sheets

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

Finding help for mental illness in Victoria (English)

Mental illnesses affect how people think, how they feel and what they do. They generally cause discomfort and unhappiness for the person with the illness and also the family members. The good news is that there is always something that can be done to improve someone's situation, no matter what type of mental illness they have. There is also help available for family members.

People who are mentally ill can feel many things at once. Some of these things might be:

- Distress
- Thinking that something is real which is not real to other people, e.g. thinking the TV is sending messages or thinking that 'I am God' or 'I am Superwoman' This is called a 'delusion' or 'having a delusion'
- Hearing voices that other people cannot hear, or seeing things that other people can't see, tasting things that other people can't taste, or feeling things that are not real e.g. spiders crawling under the skin
- Ongoing sadness
This is called 'depression'
- Agitation
- Fear
- Not wanting to do much
- Confusion, not understanding what is going on around you
- Speaking faster than you normally speak
- Speaking in a mixed up way
- Having big changes in appetite –

eating much less or much more than usual

- Having changes in sleep patterns – sleeping all the time or much less than usual

There are many words that are used by doctors and health professionals in Australia to describe mental illnesses. These include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and psychosis. The Transcultural Psychiatry Unit website has written information in many different languages about these and other mental illnesses. Their website address is <http://www.vtpu.org.au/resources/translatedmh/index.php>. These fact sheets can be downloaded for free, you can ask your doctor or someone else to do this for you, or contact the MI Fellowship Helpline on 03 8486 4222 and ask for copies to be sent to you.

In Australia, doctors, nurses and specially trained mental health workers treat the person with the mental illness to make them more comfortable and to help them carry on with their life, doing things like working, taking care of their family and playing sport. For some people, their mental illness will pass if they receive the right help and others will still have some part of the illness through their life.

There are different personal and cultural views about what causes people to become sick with a mental illness. These might include believing that bad spirits are in control of the person or that the person is suffering for actions in a previous life.

The Australian medical system does not believe that mental illness happens because of something someone has done to themselves or others, or that it is due to weakness. Doctors believe that mental illness is a chemical imbalance in the brain which is triggered by difficult things or events in a person's life that cause stress. These include:

- Psychological factors which might be about a way of thinking that is negative. Examples of this could be not having confidence in yourself or thinking that other people are better than you
- Social factors. These might include difficulties in a person's life e.g. being away from family, relationship breakdown, not having enough money, or being lonely

There are some things which have been shown to help when a person is mentally ill. In Australia these things can include taking medications from a doctor, going to hospital, receiving support from professional mental health and rehabilitation workers as well as from friends and family.

Getting help for mental illness in Victoria

It is very common for people of all cultures to feel shame, embarrassment and fear when you, or someone close to you becomes unwell from a mental illness. It is important to not let the shame or fear stop you getting help.

It is important to know that **you can ask for an interpreter when trying to get help**. When you ring the hospital, or the Telephone Interpreter Service (131 450)



an example of what needs to be said is “My name is (Anna), I speak (Italian) and I need an interpreter”. Interpreters do not cost you money. Alternatively you can ask a relative or someone from your community who speaks English well enough to call for you and ask for the interpreter.

Step 1 – Contact your local doctor or, if it is a crisis, contact a mental health service

The person with a mental illness or a family member can call. Usually you should contact your local doctor (often called a General Practitioner or GP) or your community mental health centre in the first instance. They are able to assess how serious the mental illness is and decide what would help.

Mental health services are available for people with serious mental health problems. They can be contacted 24 hours a day, seven days a week and do not cost money. Specially trained practitioners are available to help in crisis situations.

Mental health services are located close to where you live. To find the right service for your area, go to www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index. Otherwise, contact the mental health service associated with your nearest hospital (see contact numbers in the next column).

If the mentally ill person has harmed themselves, or is frightening or dangerous to others, call the emergency services (000).

What to tell the mental health worker or the doctor

- What the person who is sick is saying
 - e.g. “I am being followed.” “The water is poisoned”
- Whether the person is:
 - hearing voices that aren’t real to other people
 - seeing, smelling, tasting or feeling things that aren’t real to other people– saying they will hurt themselves

Hospitals	Mental Health Service Contact Details
Austin Health	03 9496 5000
Ballarat Health Services	1300 661 323
Bendigo Health Care Group	1300 363 788
Boxhill Hospital	1300 721 927
Broadmeadows Health Service	1300 768 073
Dandenong Hospital	1300 369 012
Frankston Hospital	1300 792 977
Geelong Hospital	03 5226 7410
La Trobe Regional Hospital	1300 363 322
Goulburn Valley Health	1300 369 005
Maroondah Hospital	1300 721 927
Mildura Base Hospital	1300 366 375
Monash Medical Centre	1300 369 012
Northern Hospital	1300 650 295
Royal Melbourne Hospital	03 9342 7000
St. Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne	1300 558 862
Sunshine Hospital	1300 859 764
The Alfred	1300 363 746
Wangaratta District Base Hospital	1300 783 347
South West Health Care Psychiatric Services (Warrnambool)	1800 808 284
Werribee Mercy Hospital	1300 657 259
Wodonga Regional Health Service	1300 881 104

- saying they will hurt someone else
- not wanting to come out of their room
- already being treated for a mental illness
- currently taking medicine or ever taken medicine before and the name of the medicine. Has the person stopped taking it? Have they done that before and what happened when they stopped taking it – did they get sick again? How did they behave?

Step 2 – Treatment

It is important that the person receives medicine and is made to be safe and calm at this stage.

Sometimes, people who are unwell will be referred to a psychiatrist, who is a doctor that specialises in mental illnesses. This could be to a private psychiatrist, which costs money, or to the local Area Mental Health Service which does not cost money. You can choose which of these services suit you best.

When would a person experiencing mental illness be admitted to hospital?

To answer this question, it is important to know some of the concepts that apply in the treatment of people with a mental illness in Australia. The Mental Health Act (1986) says that people must be helped ‘in the least restrictive environment’ possible. This often means that only people who are very sick will be admitted to hospital. Others, who are not so sick, or who are getting better will be provided with help whilst at home. It is important then that family and friends realise that they have an important role in helping the person recover.

Options for care for people with a mental illness include:

- Care in their own home. This may be with visits from the local doctor, the psychiatrist, or a community mental health team, all of whom can give medication. They will make sure the person and others feel comfortable and safe, support the family and friends and provide reassurance to the person with the illness
- Admit the person to hospital. The wards in the hospital are staffed 24 hours a day by trained mental health nurses and doctors. Each accommodates males and females. Public hospitals do not cost money and private hospitals do

In hospital medication will be given to treat the mental illness and to keep the person calm and safe. The patient will be given a comfortable bed, all meals and toilet and showering facilities.

Wards in hospitals will often have their outside doors locked and visitors may need to use the intercom next to the door to get staff to welcome them in. Family and friends are welcome to visit as well as a priest, minister or other religious person.

Occasionally the wards have specific times for visiting. If these are difficult for you, you should talk to the nursing staff. They can usually help you find a time which is more convenient.

Step 3 - Recovery

Recovery is the term used in Australia to describe the process that people take to become as well as they are able. This process includes a few different steps:

• After discharge from hospital

Before you leave hospital arrangements will be made for you, or your family member, to continue getting help. This is usually from a case manager or your local doctor. They will provide support and assist with medication. Sometimes a case manager visits at home. Help from a case manager does not cost money.

The support of family and friends is very important at this stage to assist the person to reduce stress, as is returning to parts of the person's life that are meaningful e.g. Tai Chi, relaxation, exercise and meeting with friends

• Further recovery once the person feels they are able to participate in some social activity

Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services (PDRSs) provide a service that helps people to get back to doing the types of things they were able to do before they became unwell. The case manager can give good information about what these services are and assist the person to access them. Friends and family remain important as do things that allow the person to become more independent

and feel better about themselves.

Counselling can also be helpful at this stage, but counselling that does not cost money is hard to find

• Support and help for family members of people with a mental illness

Having someone you love become sick with a mental illness can be scary and overwhelming. You may wonder how it has come about and what you can do to help. Knowing how to reduce your stress as well as the stress of the person with the illness is important, and sometimes guidance from health professionals is necessary. Things that have been shown to help include:

- Learning about mental illness in Australia. This includes knowing about the mental health system so that you can gain the most from it and know how to work with the person who is sick with a mental illness
- Learning how the things that you would normally do to reduce stress can be helpful e.g. Tai Chi, meditation, walking, family dinners
- Meeting other families in similar situations who can provide support to you
- Having discussions about these issues in your own language and in places where you feel most comfortable. To make contact with services that can provide this assistance and for personal support for yourself or your family member, contact one of the services below.

Services which can be helpful include:

- ADEC (Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities) This service provides support groups for families of people with mental illness from Chinese, Turkish and Vietnamese communities and provides advocacy 03 9480 1666 or www.adec.org.au
- Transcultural Psychiatry Unit, St. Vincent's Hospital. <http://www.vtpu.org.au/resources/translatedmh/index.php>
- MI Helpline - Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria provides information, support and referrals for people with mental illness, their families and friends. This Helpline is staffed by people who speak English and by bilingual people from a variety of backgrounds. You can phone the Helpline between 9 & 5 Monday to Friday on 03 8486 4222.
- Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria provides counselling, family education and many Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services that assist people to recover from mental illness. There is a counsellor and information fact sheets in many languages, 03 84864 200 www.mifellowship.org
- Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. provides counselling, advocacy, family support, psycho-education, information sessions for refugee survivors of torture or war - related trauma, 03 9388 0022
- SANE Australia Helpline provides support, referral and information. 1800 688 382 (free service)
- Telephone Interpreting Service: 131450 (A 24 hour, free service)



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Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
08 8221 5072
www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of Sth Australia Inc
08 8221 5160 www.mifsa.org

NT Assoc of Relatives & Friends of the Mentally Ill Inc (NT ARAFMI)
08 8948 1051 www.ntarafmi.org.au

Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc
02 9879 2600 www.sfnsw.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
03 8486 4200 www.mifellowship.org

Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc
07 4725 3664 www.mifnq.org.au

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc
07 3358 4424 www.sfq.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc
08 9228 0200 www.mifwa.com

Mental Illness Fellowship of the ACT
02 6205 1349 www.mifact.org.au