

Mental illness – what is it?

Mental illness in New Zealand, indeed worldwide, is a large and growing problem. The direct and indirect costs are substantial – and rising. Five psychiatric conditions; unipolar depression; alcohol abuse; bi-polar affective disorder; schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorder are among the ten leading causes of disability – world wide.

So what is mental illness? The word “mental” simply means “to do with the mind”. “Mental illness” is a term that refers to a group of illnesses that affect a person’s mind – much the same as “heart disease” refers to a group of illnesses that affect a person’s heart.

Because many people do not understand much about mental illness they have unreasonable fears about it.

The truth is that mental illness can affect anyone. There is usually no single, specific cause and contributing factors may be hard to separate and identify. Mental illness can develop at any stage during a person’s life but more often emerges in early adulthood.

Serious mental illnesses effects the person’s thoughts and feelings in ways that at times make it impossible for them to function as they normally would.

People may have difficulties with; memory; self-care; organising their thoughts; communicating; and feeling appropriate levels of emotion. Lack of motivation is also a common and frequently misunderstood aspect of mental illness.

Symptoms can be further complicated by some of the medications available to treat mental illness. These can have unwanted side-effects. Together, symptoms and side-effects of medication can create behaviours that most of us find difficult to understand.

The good news is that the vast majority of people with a mental illness will completely or partially recover.

So what are the chances of someone experiencing mental illness today?

Current best estimates are that at any one time, as many as one in eight people may be experiencing mental health problems. Some mental illnesses are as widespread as diabetes or asthma. So the chances are, that at some stage, we all will come in contact with someone who has or has had a mental illness, or may experience a mental illness ourselves. A disturbing factor is that less than half of those affected by mental illness seek help. We need to understand why these people do not.

New Zealand’s first ever national mental health epidemiology study, funded by the Ministry of Health has been completed. Epidemiology is the branch of medicine that, among other things, deals with incidence, distribution and possible control of illness. Later this year, the Ministry should be releasing data on the prevalence of the major disorder as well as use of services and unmet needs.

The over-riding challenge for the Ministry of Health is to further develop a mental health sector that meets these needs as well as a culture that supports people affected by mental illness. Indeed, a sector that provides for early identification and intervention, fullest possible treatment and recovery and sufficient information to enable and encourage the wider community to appreciate, understand and feel able to support people recovering from mental illness.

As challenges go – they don’t get much more difficult.

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