Talking about mental illness

Mental illness is the leading cause of disability in Canada, surpassing cancer and heart disease. No matter what our age, cultural background or income bracket, at least one in five of us will experience a mental illness in our lifetime. If mental illness is so prevalent, then why do so many people suffer in silence? It’s time to start talking.

According to the World Health Organization, health is “a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Yet so many people just define good health as being physically well. Our mental health is equally important but often does not get the attention it should. And that’s costing us all. Mental health problems cost Canada at least $50 billion a year, or 2.8 per cent of gross domestic product, not including the costs to the criminal justice system or the child welfare system. Quite aside from the economic costs, mental illness prevents millions of North Americans from reaching their full potential and living life to its fullest.

What is mental illness?

“Our psychological health has a profound effect on how we feel, perceive, think, communicate and understand the world around us. When we are mentally unwell, we experience alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour that cause us distress and impair how we function in life.” There are many types of mental illness, but the most common include those listed below.

- **Anxiety disorders** are the most prevalent of all mental illnesses. They differ from normal stress and anxiety by being more severe and long-lasting and interfere with work and relationships. Panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and general anxiety disorder fall under this category.

- **Mood disorders** involve changes and disruptions in mood and emotions. Feeling extremely sad or extremely happy from time to time is part of being human. But people with mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder experience these feelings with greater intensity and for longer periods of time.

- **Eating disorders** such as anorexia and bulimia involve a distorted body image along with extreme behaviours to manage food intake and weight.

- **Schizophrenia** makes it difficult for people to think, speak and interact in an organized way. It also involves psychosis or losing the ability to know what’s real and what isn’t. Psychosis is not just a part of schizophrenia, but may also be seen on its own or with other disorders.

- **Personality disorders** affect the way a person acts, feels and gets along with other people. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are two examples.

- **Substance use disorders (commonly called addictions)** occur when a person becomes dependent on a substance such as alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.
Warning signs of mental illness

Each mental illness has its own characteristic symptoms. However, there are some general warning signs that might alert you that someone may need professional help. Some of these include:

- marked personality change
- extreme mood swings
- excessive anxieties
- prolonged depression
- inability to cope with minor problems and daily activities
- loss of interest in hobbies and social activities
- strange or grandiose ideas, delusions or hallucinations
- problems thinking clearly
- significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- thinking or talking about suicide
- abuse of alcohol or drugs
- excessive anger, hostility, or violent behaviour

Supporting someone with a mental illness

For someone dealing with a mental illness, family and social support is vital to their recovery. You can help by:

- **Becoming informed.** To better understand what your friend or family member is dealing with, you need as much information as possible. Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP).
- **Asking what you can do.** Don’t guess or assume, ask the person what you can do to help. Mental illness sometimes makes it difficult for people to communicate.
- **Listening.** It takes courage for someone to open up about their mental health challenges. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is listen.
- **Not blaming or judging.** Judgement can be the one thing someone with a mental health issue fears the most.
- **Guiding the person to appropriate support(s).** Your EFAP can provide you with a number of options in your area. Offer to make calls, find information or drive the individual to appointments. But ask first.
- **Being optimistic.** Reassure the person that this is a medical issue and it will respond with the time, treatment and support.
- **Taking care of yourself.** Supporting anyone with a physical or mental illness can be an emotionally draining situation. Protect your own physical and emotional health.