

## Understanding Mental Illness

Unfortunately, the terms mental illness and mental health are often

used interchangeably thereby causing confusion as to our everyday understanding that mental health and mental illness are different. They are different in the same way as is good and poor physical health.

One of the fundamental differences between the two is that everyone has some level of mental health all of the time, just like physical health, whereas it is possible to be without mental illness. It is a recognised, medically diagnosable illness that affects the way people think, feel, behave, or interact with others.

Sadly, there are often perceived barriers to seeking help with the warning signs of mental illness, one being fear of dealing with the unknown, another being the stigma often unfairly associated with mental illness. The consequence can be avoidance thereby compounding the situation and slowing the recovery process.

### Mental Illness

Signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary, and often it can be a combination of changes that are indicative that help or support needs to be considered. (Please note that the following signs are not a substitute for a clinical diagnosis).

- Feeling sad or down for a prolonged period
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence
- Suicidal thoughts and self harming

## Recovery and Mental Illness

Recovery from mental illness, like physical illness, is possible with the correct professional support and those with mental illness can still enjoy a positive sense of overall health and well-being.

There is a range of professional support available in Northern Ireland for people with mental health problems including:

- Medical treatments
- Psychological therapies
- Psychiatric interventions

A GP will usually be the first point of contact for these services and will also provide advice, support and treatment where appropriate.

## Where to get help

Your own GP

Lifeline

If you, or anyone you know is in distress or despair you can call Lifeline for free on 0808 808 8000 24 hours a day.

Minding Your Head website

[www.mindingyourhead.info/](http://www.mindingyourhead.info/)

There is a wide range of voluntary sector

groups and organisations that offer support and information on a range of specific problems – please refer to the appendix at the back of this resource for a full list of services in your local health trust area.