

# Mental Illness – The Facts





## Mental illness: the facts

One in five Australians will experience a mental illness.

'Mental illness' is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses, in the same way that heart disease refers to a group of illnesses affecting the heart.

Episodes of a mental illness can come and go in periods through people's lives. Some people experience their illness only once and fully recover. For others, it recurs throughout their lives.

Most mental illnesses can be effectively treated.

Though we know that many mental illnesses are caused by a physical dysfunction of the brain, we do not know exactly what triggers this.

Stress may trigger some mental illnesses or may prolong episodes. Stress can also result when a person develops a mental illness.

People who have a mental illness often suffer a great deal. They can be disturbed and frightened by their illness.

Not only do they and their families have to cope with an illness that can

radically alter their lives, they often experience rejection and discrimination.

People with a mental illness need the same understanding and support given to people with a physical illness. A mental illness is no different - it is not an illness for which anyone should be blamed.

It is rarely possible for someone with a mental illness to make the symptoms go away just by strength of will. To suggest this is not helpful in any way.

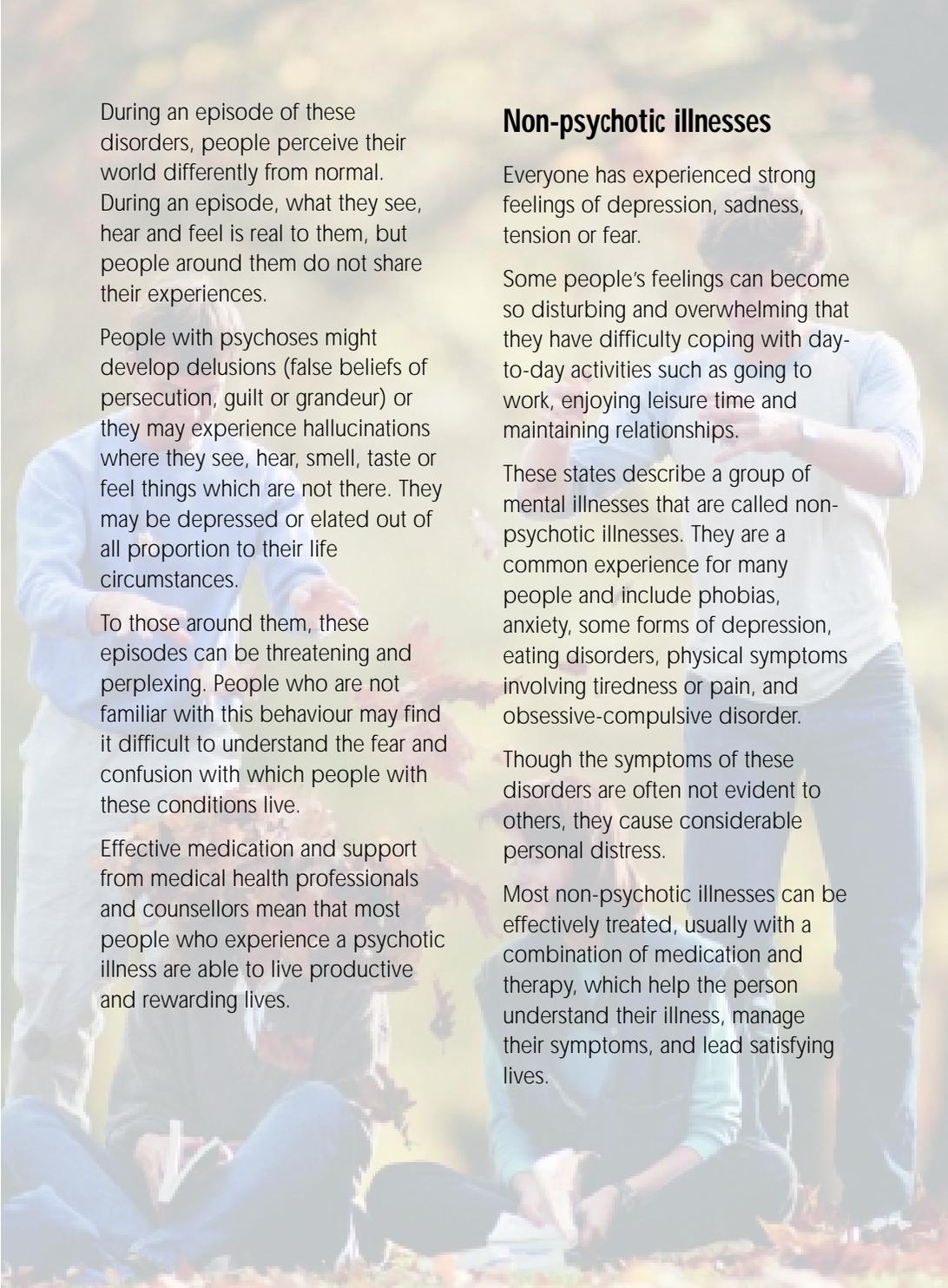
Mental illnesses can be separated into two main categories: psychotic and non-psychotic.

### **Psychotic illnesses**

A psychosis is a condition caused by any one of a group of illnesses that are known, or thought, to affect the brain causing changes in thinking, emotion and behaviour.

People experiencing an acute stage of a psychotic illness may lose touch with reality. Their ability to make sense of thoughts, feelings and external information is seriously affected, and they may become very frightened.

Psychotic illnesses include schizophrenia and some types of depression.



During an episode of these disorders, people perceive their world differently from normal. During an episode, what they see, hear and feel is real to them, but people around them do not share their experiences.

People with psychoses might develop delusions (false beliefs of persecution, guilt or grandeur) or they may experience hallucinations where they see, hear, smell, taste or feel things which are not there. They may be depressed or elated out of all proportion to their life circumstances.

To those around them, these episodes can be threatening and perplexing. People who are not familiar with this behaviour may find it difficult to understand the fear and confusion with which people with these conditions live.

Effective medication and support from medical health professionals and counsellors mean that most people who experience a psychotic illness are able to live productive and rewarding lives.

## Non-psychotic illnesses

Everyone has experienced strong feelings of depression, sadness, tension or fear.

Some people's feelings can become so disturbing and overwhelming that they have difficulty coping with day-to-day activities such as going to work, enjoying leisure time and maintaining relationships.

These states describe a group of mental illnesses that are called non-psychotic illnesses. They are a common experience for many people and include phobias, anxiety, some forms of depression, eating disorders, physical symptoms involving tiredness or pain, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Though the symptoms of these disorders are often not evident to others, they cause considerable personal distress.

Most non-psychotic illnesses can be effectively treated, usually with a combination of medication and therapy, which help the person understand their illness, manage their symptoms, and lead satisfying lives.

# Myths, misunderstanding and facts about mental illness

Myths, misunderstanding and negative stereotypes and attitudes surround mental illness. They result in stigma, isolation and discrimination.

Common questions about mental illness are:

## **Are mental illnesses a form of intellectual disability or brain damage?**

**No.** They are illnesses just like any other: heart disease, diabetes, asthma. Yet the traditions of flowers, sympathy and support provided to people with a physical illness are often denied to those with a mental illness.

## **Are mental illnesses incurable and lifelong?**

**No.** When treated appropriately and early, many people recover fully. A mental illness is like many physical illnesses which require on-going treatment (such as diabetes and heart disease), but which can be managed so that the individual can participate in everyday life.

A mental illness can come and go in people's lives. Some people have only one episode and recover completely. For others, it recurs throughout their lives and requires on-going treatment.

Though some people become disabled as a result of a chronic mental illness, many who experience even major mental illnesses manage to live full and productive lives.

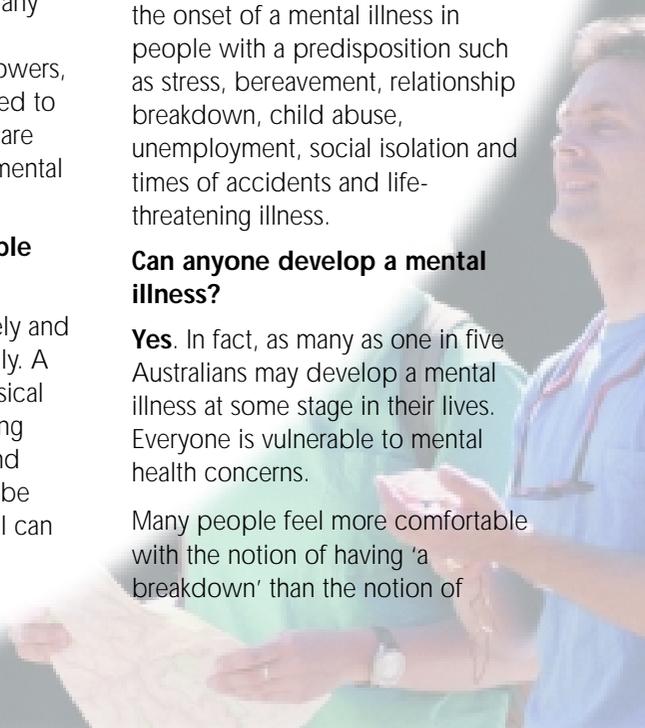
## **Are people born with a mental illness?**

The causes of mental illnesses are unclear. A predisposition to some mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, can run in families. Many other factors can contribute to the onset of a mental illness in people with a predisposition such as stress, bereavement, relationship breakdown, child abuse, unemployment, social isolation and times of accidents and life-threatening illness.

## **Can anyone develop a mental illness?**

**Yes.** In fact, as many as one in five Australians may develop a mental illness at some stage in their lives. Everyone is vulnerable to mental health concerns.

Many people feel more comfortable with the notion of having 'a breakdown' than the notion of



having a mental illness. Reluctance to talk openly about mental illnesses is a barrier to seeking early treatment.

To many, explaining away a mental illness as a nervous breakdown is preferable to being branded 'mentally ill'.

### **Are people with a mental illness usually dangerous?**

**No.** In fact, this false perception underlies some of the most damaging stereotypes. People with a mental illness are seldom dangerous. Even people with the most severe mental illness are rarely dangerous when receiving appropriate treatment.

### **Should people with a mental illness be isolated from the community?**

**No.** Most people with a mental illness recover quickly and do not need hospital care, or have only brief admissions. Treatment discoveries of recent decades have removed the need for isolation and confinement as was common in the past. A small number of people with a mental illness - one in a thousand - need hospital care, sometimes against their will. It is important to recognise that this is not the situation for the vast majority of those who might have an episode of illness.

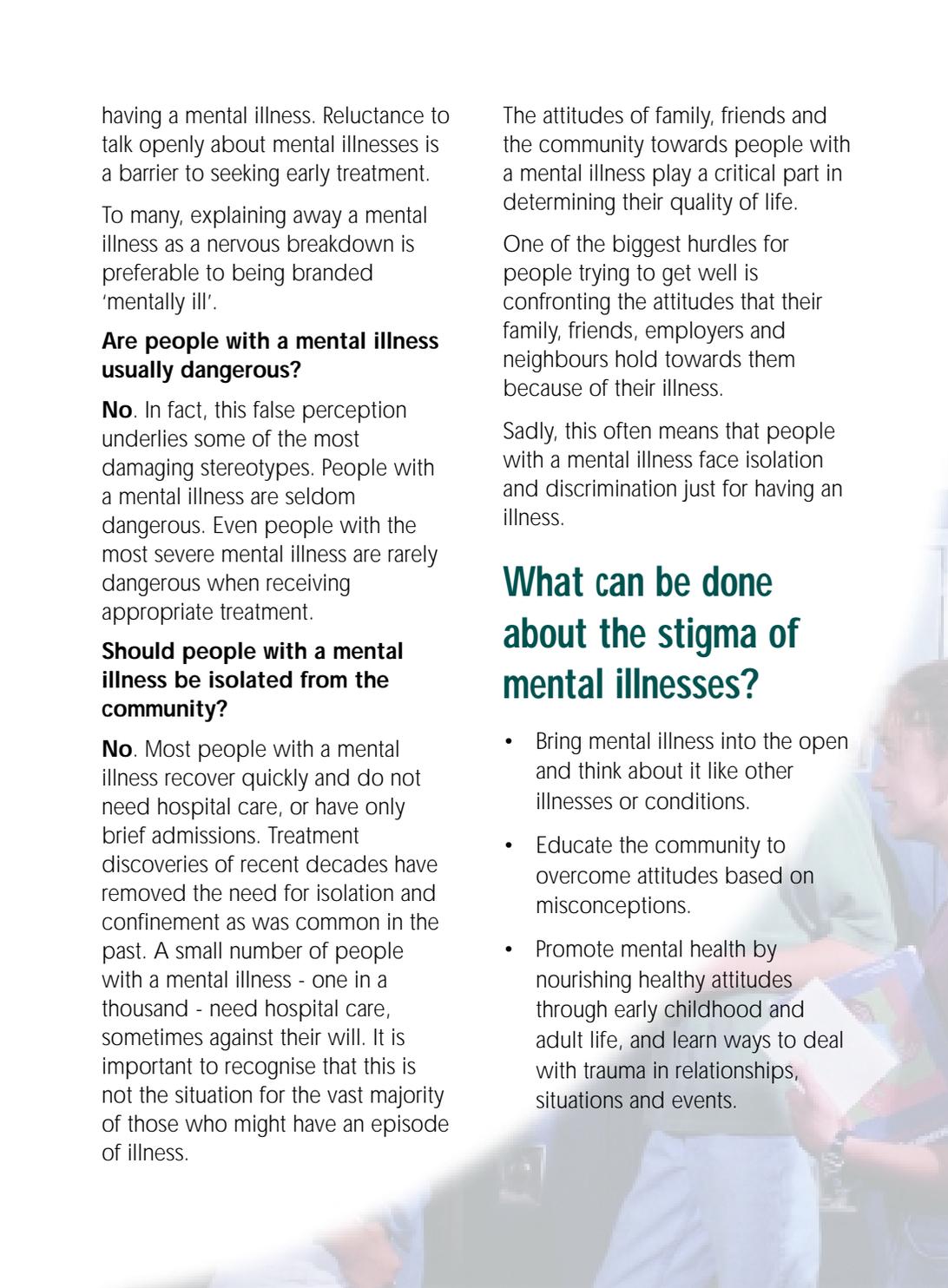
The attitudes of family, friends and the community towards people with a mental illness play a critical part in determining their quality of life.

One of the biggest hurdles for people trying to get well is confronting the attitudes that their family, friends, employers and neighbours hold towards them because of their illness.

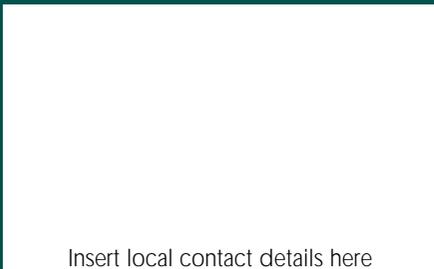
Sadly, this often means that people with a mental illness face isolation and discrimination just for having an illness.

## **What can be done about the stigma of mental illnesses?**

- Bring mental illness into the open and think about it like other illnesses or conditions.
- Educate the community to overcome attitudes based on misconceptions.
- Promote mental health by nourishing healthy attitudes through early childhood and adult life, and learn ways to deal with trauma in relationships, situations and events.



- Encourage research into mental illnesses to assist understanding of how these illnesses affect people and how they can be prevented.
- Assist friends and relatives with a mental illness to obtain care and treatment.
- Talk about mental illnesses openly with everyone you meet - it is surprising how many people are affected by mental illness, but have been too afraid of rejection to discuss it openly.
- Provide high-quality support and treatment services that enable people with a mental illness to participate fully in all aspects of community life.
- Address discrimination in every area of life, including employment, education and the provision of goods, services and facilities.



## The National Mental Health Strategy

This is the first in a series of mental health information brochures.

Information about specific mental illnesses can be found in this series of brochures, which include:

What is depression?

What is bipolar mood disorder?

What is schizophrenia?

What are eating disorders?

What are anxiety disorders?

Free copies of all brochures are available from the Mental Health Branch of the Department of Health and Aged Care:

GPO Box 9848  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Phone: 1800 066 247

Fax: 1800 634 400

<http://www.health.gov.au/hsdd/mentalhe>

For immediate counselling assistance, contact Lifeline on **13 1114**. Lifeline can also supply you with contacts, further information and help.