

# Understanding Mental Health, Mental Illness And Substance Use Disorders

“First Nations people believe that wholeness includes health and wellness of our body, our mind, heart, and spirit” (Pathways to Healing, 2006)

When a family member suffers from a mental illness, one of the most important things you can do is to take the time to learn about the disorder.

## What are mental and substance use disorders?

Mental and substance use disorders are conditions that affect a person’s thoughts, feelings, actions, and mental functioning (e.g. memory). Mental disorders are also called mental illnesses. This is the western medical term for mental unbalance, un-wellness, or mental in-harmony.

Each mental disorder:

- Includes a specific set of symptoms
- Causes a lot of distress to the person, and
- Makes life difficult to manage especially if they do not get the help they need.

**Examples:** anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, concurrent disorders (having 2 or more disorders at the same time), bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, substance use disorder (e.g. alcohol and other drug addiction). A doctor or psychiatrist makes diagnosis of a mental or substance use disorder.

## How Mental and Substance Use Disorders Can Effect People:

- **Thinking problems.** When thoughts are confusing, too fast or too slow, don’t make sense, or are unorganized.
- **Feeling problems.** Feelings that cause distress and impair ones ability to cope (e.g. feeling down, anxious, mood changes)
- **Behaviour problems.** Bizarre or obsessive behaviours that are upsetting or embarrassing to people (e.g. washing hands 20 times after touching an object)
- **Perception problems.** Experiencing the world in unusual or strange ways (e.g. hearing voices, seeing things, exaggerated sensitivity to sound)
- **Social Problems.** Some mental health problems cause people to withdraw from family and friends, leave social activities, and spend more time alone.



**Symptoms of mental unbalance often occur in cycles.** A person can be ill for weeks or months and then have a period of no symptoms. With children, these changes may occur more often. People will also vary in how severe their symptoms are. Some people can live almost symptom free while others are very disabled by the disorder. With support and treatment, most people manage very well.

### **Causes and Risks of Mental and Substance Use Disorders**

Mental and substance use disorders are complex diseases caused by a combination of environmental and genetic factors. **No single factor causes mental illness, but there are things that cause an increased risk.** These include: family history of mental illness, use of street drugs, stressful or traumatic life event, trauma or alcohol exposure during pregnancy or very early in life while the brain is still developing.

### **What Treatments are available?**

The kind of treatment depends on the disorder itself.

Treatments available are: 1) Various kinds of counseling or therapy, 2) Rehabilitation and Treatment Centres, Healing Lodges, 3) Self-help and Support Groups, and 4) Medication

### **Common Warning Signs (symptoms must last and worsen over time)**

\*Decline in work or school performance or attendance \* Prolonged sadness or irritability \*Feelings of extreme highs and lows \*Social withdrawal \*Excessive worries and anxieties \*Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits \*Strong feelings of anger \*Delusions (strong beliefs that have no basis in reality) \*Hallucinations (hearing, seeing, smelling, or feeling something that isn't real) \*Growing inability to cope \*Suicidal thoughts \*Denial of severe problems \*Numerous unexplained physical ailments \*Excessive and unhealthy substance use

### **Protect Your Mental Health!**

- Develop caring relationships
- Create safety in your home
- Learn healthy ways to manage stress and anger
- Take care of yourself and get help if you need it



### **How Can You Help If You Suspect a Problem?**

If you suspect your family member or friend may have a mental or substance use disorder:

- ✓ Get help immediately if he or she is in immediate danger.
- ✓ Consult with a doctor or mental health professional.
- ✓ Be honest and patient. Listen. Encourage him or her to seek help.

