Mental Health and Mental Illness 101

What is mental health?

Mental health is a state of being. It's about feeling good about who we are, having balance in our lives and in our thinking, and managing life's ups and downs. It's about how we feel about ourselves and other people. Like our physical health, mental health is a key part of our overall health.

Mental health and well-being contribute to our quality of life and our ability to enjoy it. Caring relationships, a place to call home, a supportive community, and work and leisure all contribute to mental health.[1]

What is mental illness?
What are mental health problems?

Mental illnesses are disturbances in thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that are severe enough to affect day-to-day functioning.[2] Mental illnesses affect people of all ages, in all kinds of jobs and at all educational levels – it does not discriminate.

A mental health problem is a broader term that includes both mental illness and/or symptoms that may not be severe enough to warrant the diagnosis of a mental illness.

MYTHBUSTING

Here are some examples of mental health and mental illness myths.

- **Mental illness is not a real illness.**
  FALSE: Mental illnesses are serious medical illnesses. They cannot be overcome through willpower and are not related to a person's character or intelligence.[3]

- **Mental illness will never affect me.**
  FALSE: One in five Canadians will have a mental health problem or illness this year.[4] Even if it doesn't affect you directly, if we include families and caregivers, mental health problems and mental illnesses affect almost every person in some way.

- **People who experience mental illness cannot recover.**
  FALSE: People can and do recover from mental illnesses. Though some disorders, such as bipolar disorder and chronic depression, may not go away completely, recovery and living well is still possible.

How can you look after your mental health?

Supporting your own mental health and well-being can mean different things to different people. Here are a few ways you can get started.

Take care of your physical health:

- Eat a well-balanced diet

- Get outside with natural light and fresh air for at least 10–20 minutes every day

- Prioritize a good night's sleep

- Stay hydrated by drinking enough water each day

- Avoid or limit your intake of alcohol, caffeine, tobacco and other non-prescription drugs

- Stay active and exercise

Take time to do things you enjoy:

- Make time for your hobbies

- Spend time with friends and family

- Meditate

- Listen to music

- Watch a favourite TV show or movie

- Write in a journal

- Volunteer or help others

Know and respect your limits:

- Be honest about the time you need to recharge and rest

- Establish boundaries between your work and home life

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What's so important about workplace mental health?

The workplace often gives people purpose, a sense of identity, belonging, social contact and security. Work may also negatively affect the mental well-being of individual employees who experience excessive workplace stress. A supportive work environment can reduce the onset, severity, impact and duration of a mental health problem or mental illness should it occur. That's why it's important to pay attention to, and proactively address, work-related stressors that may impact our mental health.

44% of workers say they have or have had mental health issues.[5]

3 out of 5 employees have experienced mental health issues in the past year because of work.[6]

People can and do recover from mental illnesses. Today, there are many different kinds of treatments, services and supports that can help.[7]

1 Quick Facts: Mental Illness & Addiction in Canada. Mood Disorders Society of Canada
2 Ibid.
3 National Alliance on Mental Illness
4 Kessler, R. C., Chiu, W.T., Demler, O., Merikangas, K.R., Walters, E.E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the national comorbidity survey replication. Archives of General Psychiatry, 62 (6), 617-627.
5 Conference Board of Canada, Building Mentally Healthy Workplaces – Perspectives of Canadian Workers and Front-Line Managers, June 2011
6 Mental Health at Work Report, National Employee Mental Wellbeing Survey Findings 2017 (UK)
7 Canadian Mental Health Association.