


For young people ages 17-22

Just Ask!



*My
brother/sister
has a
mental illness
but I don't
know what
that means!*

Acknowledgements

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For more information visit:

www.teenmentalhealth.org

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Does your brother or sister have a mental illness?

Although discovering your brother or sister has a mental illness may be really upsetting at first and you may worry that nothing is ever going to be the same again, you need to keep in mind that over time things will get better as you and your family learn to adjust. Plus, did you know that there is a range of severity of mental disorders? In most cases, a person with a mental disorder can lead a positive and productive life with appropriate treatment and support.

This guide will help you understand more about your brother/sister's illness and give you some tips on how you can cope, as well as provide advice on how to have fun with your brother/sister - despite their illness. Remember, even though your brother/sister has a mental illness, you can still enjoy spending time together.

What is a mental illness?

My brother/sister has a mental illness, but what does that mean?

Mental illnesses are medical conditions caused by changes in brain function that affect a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Also, the symptoms and problems caused by the mental illness must be beyond what is considered a normal part of development or the person's culture. Mental illnesses have many different causes but all reflect disturbances in how the brain usually functions.

Is there more than one type of mental illness?

There are several types of mental illnesses! And it is possible that someone may have more than one type of mental illness. So someone with an eating disorder may also have depression. But they are ALL treatable!

It's really important that you educate yourself about mental illness in order to better understand it and to learn how to cope with having a brother/sister with a mental illness.



Types of mental illnesses

There are many different types of mental illnesses; here is a list of some of the more common mental illnesses among young people.

► **Mood disorders**

Everyone has bad days or feels low once in a while but when someone has a mood disorder, their moods are more extreme and last much longer. One type of mood disorder is depression but mood disorders can also include extreme highs, called mania. This is when someone has beyond too much energy and is thinking too rapidly. Although that may sound great, when a person is in a manic state they can actually get into some serious trouble with their reckless behaviour.

- ★ **Major depression** – Major depression is much more than the blues. A person affected will be depressed from several weeks to even months and this low mood really gets in the way of doing their daily activities such as doing well at school, having friends or getting along with family members
- ★ **Bipolar disorder** – This is when someone may have serious depression for a period of time and then their mood completely changes to the opposite with extreme highs or irritability and anger. These mood swings vary from mild to severe. They also may change for no apparent reason.

For more info check these out:

www.moooddisorderscanada.ca

www.teenmentalhealth.org

www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/pdf/dwd_printable.pdf



Types of mental illnesses

► **Anxiety Disorders**

Anxiety disorders are not just the regular butterflies in your stomach once in a while. Anxiety disorder occurs when worries, nervousness and anxiety take over a person's life.

Anxiety disorders are common and there are several types, which include:

- ★ **Panic disorder** – People with panic disorder experience intense episodes of dread or terror for no apparent reason. Their heart will race and they may get dizzy, have sweaty palms, get short of breath and have chest pains.
- ★ **Agoraphobia** – This is when someone avoids situations in which they feel trapped or places where they are out of their comfort zone. The fear can be so intense that it leads some people to become completely housebound.
- ★ **Social phobia** – People with social phobia are afraid of being judged or embarrassed by others. So they avoid everyday social situations such as ordering food in a restaurant, speaking in class or asking for directions even if they're lost.
- ★ **Specific phobia** - This is a fear and avoidance of a specific situation or object. For example, fear of heights or spiders.
- ★ **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder** – OCD is characterized by recurring, unwanted anxiety-producing thoughts or feelings (obsessions) and repetitive, unwanted behaviours (compulsions). For example, fear of germs or constant handwashing. The excessive amount of time

Types of mental illnesses

given to these obsessive thoughts and compulsive actions interferes with relationships and daily functioning.

★ **Generalized anxiety disorder** – This is excessive worrying about everyday activities, beyond what is normal. This worry leads to restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, headache, fatigue and sleep disturbances.

For more info check these out:

www.anxietybc.ca

www.anxietycanada.ca



► **Psychosis**

Psychosis is a brain disorder that affects a person's thinking, perception and behaviour. Basically, the person may lose touch with reality for periods of time. People with psychosis may experience hallucinations, delusions and act unusually.

For more info check these out:

www.cmha.ca

www.psychosissucks.ca



Types of mental illnesses

► Eating Disorders

Eating disorders occur when someone's eating habits and weight concerns become a medical, psychological and social problem. They are serious conditions that are much more than just about trying to lose weight or eating different kinds of foods.

There are also various types of eating disorders, which include:

- ★ **Anorexia nervosa** – People affected with Anorexia nervosa are dangerously underweight due to starving themselves. They often exercise excessively to burn off calories and they usually feel they are fat even when they are actually very thin.
- ★ **Bulimia nervosa** – Most people with Bulimia nervosa actually look to be a healthy weight or may be slightly overweight. The person affected will often engage in binge eating (where they'll eat everything they can all at once, until they're really full). Usually when they binge, it's high fatty foods they prefer, followed by self-induced vomiting as well as abusing laxatives and diet pills.
- ★ **EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified)** – An eating disorder that does not meet the full criteria of anorexia or bulimia. An example would be binge eating, which is characterized by episodes of compulsive overeating to comfort yourself during stressful times, often followed by extreme dieting.

For more info check these out:

www.cmha.ca

www.nedic.ca



Types of mental illnesses

► Self-injury

Self-injury is when someone intentionally causes harm to themselves without the intent to die. It is not a mental illness in itself but often occurs together with a mental illness.

The reasons someone may commit acts of self injury vary, but may include:

- feeling a sense of emotional release
- gaining control over their body
- relieving anger
- self-hatred or guilt
- escaping feelings of emptiness or numbness, etc.

The forms of self injury may include:

- cutting their skin
- burning their skin
- breaking bones or causing bruising
- self-biting
- overdosing on drugs, (including over-the-counter or prescription drugs)

► Suicide

Suicide is a behaviour, not a mental illness but is much more common when people have a mental illness. Suicide is also more common if there is a family history of suicide. When someone is feeling suicidal, they often (but not always) will say something about those feelings.

SUICIDE is REAL!

SUICIDE IS REAL!

If you suspect your brother/sister is suicidal – ask them!!!

Don't be afraid that you may be putting the idea into his/her head.
They will be relieved that you cared enough to ask.

Here's what to do:

- Try to get them to open up & talk about how they're feeling.
- Do not be judgmental – just listen to them.
- Find out if they have a plan already in place.
- Do not leave him/her alone.
- You can't save him/her on your own!!!
- Tell your parents or a responsible trusted adult.

CALL 911
or take them to the hospital
emergency room immediately!

Types of mental illnesses

► **ADHD**

If your brother or sister has ADHD, they will have difficulty paying attention, be impulsive and have a hard time sitting still. His/her symptoms can vary from day to day and even from one hour to the next.

Some other symptoms include:

- forgetfulness
- easily distracted
- careless mistakes - lack of detail
- talks a lot
- has difficulty waiting

He/she may experience a range of emotions and periods of frustration as well as issues with social functioning.

*** Emotional responses:**

- anger and irritable outbursts
- low self-esteem
- depression
- anxiety

*** Social functioning effects:**

- he/she may be bullied
- he/she may be an attention seeker (class clown)
- disruptive behaviour

For more info check these out:

www.cmha.ca

www.caddac.ca

www.adhd.ca

www.camh.net



Types of mental illnesses

► **Substance-related disorders**

There are two types of substance-related disorders: substance dependence and substance abuse.

What is substance dependence?

- * **Physical substance dependence** is when a person's body gets so used to the substance that he/she can no longer function without it in their system. Plus, his/her body needs more and more of the substance to feel the effects, so they build up tolerance. If he/she does stop taking the substance, his/her body will go through withdrawal, meaning they'll experience a range of uncomfortable symptoms.
- * **Psychological substance dependence** is when his/her thoughts become obsessed with using and obtaining the substance. They'll skip out on their responsibilities, miss school and neglect friends, all because their mind can only think about trying to get the next fix. It becomes it extremely difficult to stop - this is called craving!

What is substance abuse?

Substance abuse is when a person continues to crave and abuse the substance despite negative consequences.

For more info check these out:

www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

www.aa.org

www.aadac.com



MYTHS Busted

- ✗ **MYTH:** People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.
- ✓ **FACT:** Of course when an person with a mental illness commits a crime it's always in the news but that doesn't mean everyone with a mental illness is violent! People with mental illnesses are NO more violent or dangerous than anyone else! In fact, they are more likely to hurt themselves or be hurt by others than to hurt other people.
- ✗ **MYTH:** People with mental illnesses are just weak.
- ✓ **FACT:** People do not choose to become ill and they cannot just snap out of it. Mental illnesses have to do with brain chemistry and brain function and are not due to lack of willpower.
- ✗ **MYTH:** People with mental illnesses are usually financially poor and not very smart.
- ✓ **FACT:** Social status has nothing to do with whether or not someone has or will get a mental illness. In fact, studies show that most people with mental illness have average or above-average intelligence.
- ✗ **MYTH:** Mental illnesses are very rare.
- ✓ **FACT:** They are actually quite common; in fact 1 in 5 people will experience a mental illness at some point in their life.
- ✗ **MYTH:** People with mental illnesses can never lead normal lives.
- ✓ **FACT:** With early intervention, treatment and a good support system, people can and mostly do recover from mental illness.
- ✗ **MYTH:** Kids can't get mental illnesses.
- ✓ **FACT:** Anyone at any age can get a mental illness.

Who gets mental illnesses?

*C*an anyone get a mental illness?

Mental illnesses can affect anyone of any race, religion, nationality, gender or age. Although mental illnesses are complex, they may be caused by a combination of many factors, including:

- * genetics;
- * biology;
- * environment;
- * drugs and alcohol;
- * traumatic life events.

*W*ill I get it too?

This is a common concern but first of all you need to know that mental illnesses are not contagious and just because you're related, it doesn't mean you're also going to get a mental illness. It's like every other medical illness. For example, just because your sister may have poor eyesight, that doesn't mean you're also going to have poor eyesight. There are many factors that contribute to mental illnesses as mentioned earlier.

So even if you inherit the possibility of getting a mental illness, this does not necessarily mean you will develop one. Also, there are many things you can do that may lower the risk of developing a mental illness, such as learning to handle stress, living a healthy lifestyle, avoiding illicit drugs and using alcohol in moderation.

Who gets mental illnesses?

A *m I to blame?*

You had nothing to do with the fact that your brother/sister developed a mental illness. If you're worried that you didn't spend enough time with him/her or that you teased him/her too much, be assured that your actions didn't have anything to do with it. Your teasing was a normal part of growing up, so don't feel guilty. IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!



FAST FACT!

**Mental illnesses are just as real
as any medical condition!**

Mental illnesses are disorders of the brain,
just like diabetes is a illness of the pancreas.

Are mental illnesses forever?

I feel like I lost my brother/sister forever.

It may feel like someone you love died, or that your family is changed forever. There will be some pretty tough times ahead but it's OK to grieve! You may cry, get angry and frustrated – it's all perfectly natural. So take as long as you need to adjust. Learn to accept it and how to best live your life with its new reality.



FAST FACT!

One of the most common medical problems amongst youth aged 15-24 is depression.

About 8% of youth report having met the criteria for a diagnosis of depression at some point in their lives.

Will my brother/sister get better?

Recovery is possible, even in the most severe forms of mental illness. With medication, counselling and appropriate care and support, people can live healthy, useful and fulfilling lives.

Are mental illnesses forever?

Factors that help people RECOVER from mental illness:

- If the person was well adjusted prior to the start of the illness
- Early effective treatment
- Onset of the illness following a major life event
- Good support network of family, friends and professionals
- Taking medications as prescribed
- Learning how to cope with stress
- Commitment to getting better and living well

Also, although people may need to take medication for long periods of time to control symptoms, as they get older their symptoms may change and/or become less severe.

Keep in mind that sometimes it can take months for improvements to show in someone being treated for a mental illness. The individual may be prescribed many different medications before the doctors find the one that works best. They may also have to switch medications as their symptoms change. Treatment is complicated and there is no magic pill that works overnight.

Take care of yourself!

Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed, so just realize you can't single-handedly cure your brother/sister. You have to know your limits and when to say no. It's OK to take a step back and take care of yourself. If you're having a particularly rough day and feeling under pressure, take time out for yourself. Go for a walk or go hang out with friends. You can't help anyone else until you take care of yourself.



I feel guilty for being healthy when my brother/sister is ill.

When you are doing well in life and feeling healthy, it's natural to feel badly that your brother/sister hasn't done as well. But it's important to know that it's not your fault that your brother/sister is ill. Be proud of yourself and your own accomplishments. Do not try to hide or minimize your own victories to make your brother/sister feel better. Most likely, he/she wants you to be happy and will also be proud of you too. You have nothing to feel guilty about. You have done nothing wrong and life isn't always fair, but you have to make the best of it.

Take care of yourself!

I feel bad for not wanting to hang around my brother/sister.

It's perfectly normal to want to get away from your brother/sister once in a while. Hanging out with your brother/sister may be exhausting sometimes and you may feel like you have to tiptoe around him/her, not knowing what to say and afraid you may hurt him/her. So know that it's OK to take time away and just be free with your own friends. You have to take care of yourself first before you can be there for anyone else. Plus, you have every right to have your own life!

IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO SPEND TIME WITH YOUR SIBLING

Spending time with your brother/sister will help you to:

- Learn to adjust to your brother/sister's needs.
- Learn how to communicate better with him/her.
 - Understand how he/she thinks and feels.
- It will also help your brother/sister get to know you better, and this is equally important!

Try to keep an open mind & don't forget to have fun.

Things to remember

- It's OK to grieve, get angry and/or sad
- It's OK to take time to yourself
- You are not to blame for your brother/sister's mental illness
- You may have to adjust your expectations of your brother/sister
- You may have to modify your communication skills when communicating with your brother/sister
- Know that your sibling's symptoms may vary and at times may seem worse than others
- Try to appreciate the small victories
- Life doesn't revolve around your brother/sister
- Don't do everything for your brother/sister – he/she has to learn to cope and manage his/her own responsibilities
- Focus on your brother/sister as a person and not as the disorder
- Your whole family is affected, not just you
- It may be an emotional roller coaster at times
- There is nothing to be ashamed of
- If your brother/sister lashes out at you – remember it's often just the illness talking
- You come first
- You are not alone
- You can learn from your brother/sister

Thinking about your brother/sister

I don't think my brother/sister likes me.

Sometimes it may seem as if your brother/sister doesn't like you or he/she may seem distant, but just know it's not your fault. If he/she is cruel to you sometimes, it may not be because of something you did. Often your brother/sister's reaction to you may be just the illness causing him/her to act like that and he/she really doesn't mean to hurt your feelings.

Open up to your brother/sister.

Sometimes it helps to let your brother/sister know what you're going through and how their illness affects you. Although each situation is unique, sharing your feelings with your sibling may help him/her to feel part of your life. Realize that your brother/sister may feel left out and isolated sometimes, as he/she may sense that others pity them or are afraid to burden them with their problems. Sharing your feelings will show that you value his/her opinion and consider him/her to be an important person in your life. However, if your brother/sister is going through a harder time than usual, be sensitive as to how much to share with them.

Taking care of your brother/sister

I feel like I have to take care of my brother/sister.

It may not be fun having to help out and do your sibling's chores sometimes, or be watching over him/her. You have every right to get annoyed and angry with this sometimes. When you get really overloaded, just take time to yourself and know that helping out is really appreciated by your family and it may also bring your family closer together.



I worry about the future.

It's normal to be concerned about your brother/sister's future and your own future. You can't give up your own dreams and goals because you're afraid your brother/sister may need help. You have every right to your own life and to dream of having a good career and perhaps even starting your own family one day. Know that there are many people out there that can help take care of your brother/sister if need be. Your first responsibility is to take care of yourself.

Your family

*M*y family dynamics have changed.

Initially, this will be a challenging time for your family and at times there may be more strain on the family than other times. However, with time many things often get easier. Know that everyone deals with things differently. Some family members may deny that your brother/sister has a mental illness, while other family members may immediately want to seek out counselling to learn how to cope. This is a major change in your family's life and it's OK for you to be scared and to grieve. Take as long as you need to adjust. It's important to talk to a counsellor about this change and get information about your brother/sister's mental illness. Counsellors will answer any questions you may have and also provide support for you along the way as you and your family learn to adjust.



Dealing with your parents

My parents seem to forget about me.

Your parents love you and are very proud of you. Know that they may be exhausted and emotionally drained from dealing with your brother/sister, that they don't purposely mean to neglect you. Maybe they assume that you're OK because you're the 'healthy' and 'successful' one. However, if you're feeling left out, feel free to talk to them and tell them what's going on. Help them understand how you're feeling. Consider asking your mom or dad for alone time, when just the two of you can have a free day to do something fun together. It's OK to want more from them. **YOU ARE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS YOUR BROTHER/SISTER!.**

My parents expect so much more from me.

First of all, ask yourself if they are really pressuring you – or if you're pressuring yourself. Sometimes when people have family challenges, the other children feel pressure to be perfect in order to take pressure away from their already burdened parents. So if this is the case, know that you are human and don't have to try so hard to be perfect all the time.

However, if they really are pressuring you, know that it's because they are proud of you and they may really feel that you can do just about anything. If you feel that they are putting too much pressure on you – tell them. Talk to them calmly about how you're feeling. They'll love you no matter what. So just take care of yourself and know your limits!

Dealing with other people



***I** am embarrassed about my brother/sister; people judge us.*

People will be unkind at times and may even poke fun at your brother/sister. You need to know that they just don't understand. Plus, there's still a lot of stigma attached to mental illness. Therefore, you can choose to either ignore them or stand up to them and teach them about mental illness. Remember though: you can't force someone to see through your eyes. BUT you don't have to put up with ridicule either! Also, many people with a mental illness have a self-stigma - they may feel responsible for causing their own illness. You can help your brother/sister to understand that his/her illness is not their fault.

Dealing with other people

Talking to other people about your brother/sister's mental illness is not always cut and dry. HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP:

- Try to be as straightforward and truthful as possible.
- Take it as an opportunity to raise awareness about mental illness and break the stigma attached to it.
- Feel free to just tell people close to you that you can trust at first and then consider opening up to other people.
- Do not make up lies and cover-up stories – consider what would happen if the lies and stories got back to your brother/sister or other family members. They may be very hurt and think you're ashamed of them.
- If you sense someone will be very judgmental and critical, then maybe consider just telling them you're having family difficulties or that you'd rather not talk about it at this time.
- If telling someone may cause more stress to you or your family, then remember that your family life is private and you do not need to tell everyone everything. You can tell whoever you want to. You have nothing to be ashamed of.

YOU MAY BE SURPRISED AT HOW COMPASSIONATE AND SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE ARE!

Visiting a counsellor

If you're feeling a little overwhelmed and stressed or have questions about your brother/sister's mental illness, you could talk to your school counsellor. Counsellors will have access to information about mental illness and can really support you as you learn to adjust. Remember, your school counsellor is there to help and is free of charge. Although many of your questions may be answered in this booklet, it often helps to talk to a professional face to face, as each situation is unique. Make a list of questions to ask your counsellor and feel free to express your own concerns and how you are feeling.

Some things to talk about with your counsellor:

1. Ask him/her what a mental illness is
2. Ask him/her what treatment involves
3. Ask him/her what you can do to help
4. Tell him/her what you are feeling
5. Tell him/her how your life has changed
6. Tell him/her about your family life
7. Tell him/her about your relationship with your brother/sister

What you say with your counsellor is basically confidential! Talk to your counsellor about confidentiality so you can understand what that means.

Tips to help you cope

- **Learn about mental illness** - Surf the internet or take some books out of the library. The more you know, the easier it will be to make sense of things. Use reliable sources, such as those listed at the end of this booklet.
- **Live your own life** - Continue doing what you enjoy doing and follow your own path.
- **Talk to a counsellor** - If you're feeling confused, stressed or even if you just have questions about mental illness, talk to your school counsellor - that's what they are there for.
- **Be patient** - Realize that your brother/sister will not get better overnight. Symptoms will vary so it's important to be patient. As well, be patient with your other family members and friends - they are all affected by your brother/sister's illness and it will take time for everyone to adjust.
- **Create a support network outside the family** - It's always a good thing to have your own friends aside from your family so that you can get away from it all, clear your head and just have fun.
- **Your feelings matter** - Let your feelings be heard. No one can read your mind or help if you don't say anything. You have the right to be heard.
- **Take special time with your parents** - You may feel neglected at times if your brother/sister requires special attention from your parents, so just know that it's OK to ask for one on one time away with your parents once in a while. You are just as important as your brother/sister. So why not ask your mom or dad to have a day together - just the two of you and go do something fun.

Tips to help you cope

- **Participate in activities** - It's important to take part in activities you like, for example: if you love sports join a sports team, or if you like music, join the school band.
- **Join a support group** - It's helpful to talk to other people who can relate to what you're going through.
- **Find yourself** - It's important that you explore your dreams and continue discovering who you are and where you're going in life.
- **Learn to communicate** - You may have to adapt your communication skills to be better with your brother/sister, as he or she may not always be able to understand things, such as how you are feeling or what you're trying to express.
- **Know it's not your fault!** - NOBODY CAUSED YOUR BROTHER/SISTER'S MENTAL ILLNESS so don't blame yourself or anyone else.
- **Be positive** - A positive attitude can go a long way. Have fun and try to look at the bright side of things.
- **Be realistic** - Know what to expect from your brother/sister and know that he/she may not be able to always be there for you, and his/her symptoms may also vary with some times being worse than others.
- **Set plans on how to deal with aggressive behaviour** - Sometimes he/she may act violently, especially if using drugs or alcohol or if he/she has psychosis. Try to remove yourself from the situation immediately and get your parents. They may have to involve health care professionals or call the police.
- **Accept it** - Accepting your brother/sister's mental illness will definitely make life easier. It will help you be positive, to cope and to adapt.

What I learned from my brother/sister

"I used to have a hard time seeing things from other people's point of view, but my brother taught me how to be open minded and stop thinking about myself all the time."

~ Kelly, age 19

"I have a higher self-esteem now and can stand up to people who judge us." ~ Neil, age 20

"I learned to be more giving and patient." ~ Leslie, age 19

"I learned how to be more understanding and take life slower."

~ Lindsey, age 21

"My family has all learned how to better work together and we're much closer now."

~ Simon, age 19

"My sister taught me to relax and have fun - enjoying the simple things in life." ~ Tyler, age 17

"I learned to be less fussy and be happy with everything life brings me. So what if I am not good at something - there's so much more to be grateful for!" ~ Lorrie, age 20

"My brother taught me to be appreciative of the simple things in life." ~ Kory, age 18

"My little brother taught me how to follow my dreams and not let anyone or anything stop me. Nothing stops him so why should I let anything stop me!?" ~ Dave, age 19

Internet resources

For more information on mental illness or to find a support group in your area, visit some of these helpful and credible websites:

- www.teenmentalhealth.org
- www.camh.net
- www.cmha.ca
- www.mindmatters.edu.au
- www.psychosissucks.ca
- www.schizophrenia.ca
- www.anxietycanada.ca
- www.nedic.ca
- www.ocdfoundation.org
- www.letsfacethis.ca
- www.caddac.ca
- www.lainghouse.org
- www.dana.org
- www.nimh.nih.gov
- www.mooodisorderscanada.ca
- www.heretohelp.bc.ca



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www.teenmentalhealth.org

