HEALTH EDUCATION CORNER

MENTAL HEALTH

What is mental health?

Generally speaking, our mental health refers to our state of mind and our ability to cope with the everyday things that are going on around us. Someone with 'good' mental health usually feels capable of dealing with the different everyday situations that they find themselves in. When we have a mental illness, this process is often a lot more difficult. Mental illnesses are really common in Australia and about 1 in 4 people between the ages of 14-25 will experience mental illness at some point.

Keep in mind that this is a simplified definition of mental health and that it's totally normal for everyone to have mental health issues - that is, to go through ups and downs. It is only when the difficulties start to hang around for a while and it feels like nothing can make them go away that they may be considered a mental illness.

What causes mental illnesses?

Diagnosing a mental illness is no easy task as there are a huge range of factors that need to be considered. It's impossible to pinpoint the exact cause of a mental illness, and it's often likely to be a combination of a few different things. Some of the things that may contribute to mental health issues are:

- **biological factors** – mental illnesses can be passed on genetically from parents to their children. Hormones are another biological factor that can be responsible for changes in our mental health.

- **early life events** – traumatic events that happened when we were younger, such as neglect or abuse, can have a strong influence on our mental health later in life.

- **recent life events** – there are lots of events that can affect our mental health, such as persistent stress from study or work, or a traumatic event such as the loss of a loved one.

- **internal factors** – mental illnesses can also be influenced by thoughts and feelings that come from inside of us, as opposed to from our surroundings. This can include things like our body image and self-esteem.

- **misuse of drugs** – drugs, including alcohol, have all sorts of different effects on our brain and the results are very unpredictable. One of the common effects of consuming too many drugs is a negative impact on our mental health.

Common signs of mental illness

There are some things to look out for when it comes to detecting a mental illness. However, it's also really important to remember that a lot of the tell-tale signs of mental illnesses are just a part of life at some point or other for the vast majority of us. Some of the signs are:

- loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy doing
- feeling worried
- constantly being in a bad mood
- having trouble sleeping, or sleeping way more than usual
- crying for no apparent reason
- feeling 'down'
- lack of motivation
- having trouble concentrating
- changes in eating habits
- having trouble performing at school or at work
- substance abuse
- having trouble coping with or participating in everyday activities.

If you're experiencing any of these, it doesn't necessarily mean that there is something serious going on, but it's worth having a chat to someone you trust about it. If you have been experiencing many of these symptoms over a long period of time, it's a good idea to chat to someone you trust and set up an appointment with your GP to talk it over.

How to look after your mental health

Although mental illnesses are not always avoidable, there are some simple things that we can do all year round to look after our mental health:

- exercise (it releases endorphins which can improve your mood)
- surround yourself with supportive people
- put aside some time every day to relax
- do the things that you enjoy doing
- stay in touch with your friends and family

Check out 9 tips to improve your wellbeing for some more ideas. If you've been doing these things and you've still been struggling for a long time, it's a good idea to have a chat to someone you trust and have a think about talking to someone about it in a professional context.

What can I do now?

- Have a look at some [ways to relax](#).
- [Check in with a friend](#) to see how they're doing.
- Remember that mental health is just as important as physical health

Source

The information for this article has been sourced from the Reachout.com website run by Inspire Foundation.