

## **Factsheet MH1 – Can anyone experience mental illness?**

Yes, mental illness is very common. About one in four people in Britain has this diagnosis, but there is a great deal of controversy about what it is, what causes it, and how people can be helped to recover. Mental health is as important to an individual as good physical health. People with a mental illness can experience problems in the way they think, feel or behave. This can significantly affect their relationships, their work, and their quality of life. Having a mental illness is difficult, not only for the person concerned, but also for their family and friends.

### **Diagnosis Information**

#### **Depression**

Depression is extremely common and most people will experience some form of depression during their life time perhaps after a major life change or bereavement. You may notice that the person you care for experiences symptoms which include:

- tiredness and lack of energy
- change in their sleeping pattern
- unhappiness most of the time
- concentration problems and difficulties in decision making
- loss of self-confidence and self-esteem
- guilt and worthlessness feelings
- loss of or increase in appetite
- irritability or impatience
- withdrawal and finding no pleasure in life or what they usually enjoy
- physical aches and pains with no physical cause
- possibly thinking / talking about suicide

If the feelings are interfering with someone's everyday life and don't go away after a couple of weeks, or if they come back, over and over again, it may be a sign that a person is depressed and may need professional help.

#### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a normal feeling which we can all relate to in threatening or difficult situations. Short-term stress or anxiety can be useful as it can make us more alert and enhance our performance. Anxiety can however have a negative effect on a person's health both on their mind and body and can influence how a person thinks, feels and behaves and have an impact on a person's day-to-day life. You may notice the person you care for experiences symptoms which include:

- feeling the worst is going to happen
- appearing unusually worried or fearful
- avoiding certain situations (e.g. never leaving the house)
- irritability and inability to relax
- increased muscular tension
- heightened alertness

- loss of confidence and a desire to seek reassurance from others
- difficulty falling and staying asleep at night
- headaches / migraines

Sometimes anxiety can take the form of a panic attack. Panic attacks may appear 'out of the blue' and can be extremely frightening. They can make a person feel out of control and experience chest pains and palpitations.

### **Bipolar Disorder (Manic Depression)**

Bipolar or Manic Depression is a mood disorder. Someone diagnosed as bipolar may swing from moods of depression to periods of overactive excited behaviour known as mania. Depending on the individual there may be stable times between highs and lows.

As a carer you may notice the following symptoms during a manic phase including:

- Increased energy, hyperactivity, uninhibited and reckless behaviour
- Inability or unwillingness to sleep
- Talking quickly – other people may find it difficult to understand
- Heightened sense of their own importance and grandiose schemes & ideas
- Reckless money spending
- On the positive side, people may be very creative during a manic phase and feel it is a valuable experience.

(Symptoms for depression can be found in the section entitled Depression above)

### **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia affects thinking, feeling and behaviour. When someone becomes unwell with schizophrenia they are likely to show a change in their behaviour and their ability to perform everyday tasks and activities. They may be confused, anxious, suspicious of other people and reluctant to believe they need help.

As a carer you may find someone with schizophrenia experiences the following symptoms including:

- Psychosis – losing contact with reality and having severe disturbances of thought and emotion.
- Confused thinking - finding it hard to concentrate, drifting from one idea to another and often making little sense to others.
- Hallucinations – hearing, seeing, feeling or smelling something which others do not. Hearing voices is the most common and these can often be critical and unfriendly.
- Delusions – believing something that others don't share, e.g. believing that they are being followed by a secret agent.

### **Psychosis**

Psychosis describes conditions which affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. Some people may only have one psychotic episode and make a full recovery never experiencing another episode. For others it is a longer process.

Someone with psychosis may have symptoms including:

- Hallucinations – hearing, seeing, feeling or smelling something which other people do not.

- Believing something that others don't share (delusions) which may make the person feel they are being controlled.
- Confused thinking – thoughts and sentences may become confused and unclear and may not make sense.
- Mood swings – unusually excited or depressed
- Changes in behaviour e.g. extremely active or lethargic, talking to themselves, avoiding people, becoming aggressive or upset.

### **Personality disorders**

Personality disorder occurs in someone whose personality or group of characteristics may cause regular and long-term problems in the way they cope with their life and interact with other people. Someone with a personality disorder may think, feel and behave in a rigid way and will have a more limited range of emotions with which they respond to every day life.

Someone with personality disorder may find it difficult to:

- make or keep relationships
- work effectively with others
- behave in a socially acceptable way
- control their feelings or behaviour