Introduction

Caring about and maintaining our mental health is as important as our physical health. Our minds, together with our bodies, make us who we are, and they both need to function well so we can be at our best.

In Ireland, mental health problems affect a lot of people either directly or indirectly through a friend or family member. And that includes young people too. One in three young people in Ireland will experience some form of mental health issue in any given year. Even among adults living with a mental health problem or mental illness, the first onset of their symptoms began when they were teenagers. This is why it is important that young people get a good understanding of mental health early in life, so they can help themselves and others if they face challenges to their mental health.

Cycle Against Suicide is a national awareness charity that strives to break down the barriers around mental health and works to increase awareness of the supports and treatments that are available to those affected by mental health problems. We have introduced an evidence-based Schools' Programme that educates students on mental health issues, helps build resilience and empowers them to become mental health champions for their peers. This toolkit is part of our efforts to support young people in taking care of their mental health and getting the help they need.

If you or someone you care about have a mental health issue, know that you are not alone. There are people and organisations that can provide the support you need. This toolkit is your first step to understanding what is going on and it provides you with a list of helpful resources so you can find that support.

What is mental health?

Mental health refers to a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being. The state of your mental health determines how you handle stress, how you relate to other people and situations, as well as the choices you make. It affects how you think, how you feel, and how you act.

Difference between mental health and mental illness

While mental health refers to how a person is able to cope with the demands and stress of day to day living, mental illness refers to a range of psychological or behavioural symptoms that reduce an individual's capacity to cope with daily life.

What is mental ill health/mental distress

Mental illnesses are disorders of brain function. They have many causes and result from complex interactions between a person's genes, their environment and social factors. Having a mental illness is not a choice or a sign of weakness, and people from all different cultures and backgrounds can suffer from mental illnesses. Mental health problems can often be diagnosed clinically by healthcare professionals.

A mental illness makes the things you do in life hard, like work, school and socialising with other people. If you think you (or someone you know) might have a mental disorder, it is best to speak to a professional as soon as possible. You can do this in complete confidence.

What causes mental illness?

There is no particular way to develop a mental illness. For some people it develops due to stressful or traumatic events that triggers certain feelings and emotions, for others it is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. For some others, it could be caused by changes in the body which can affect how they feel or react. It is also possible to have no identifiable cause.

Mental illness in your family

One of the factors that affects a person's mental health is their genes. When a parent has certain mental illnesses, their children have a higher risk of developing mental illnesses than other children. When both parents are mentally ill, the chance is even greater that the child might become mentally ill. This is particularly true of conditions like an anxiety disorder, ADHD, schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, alcoholism or other drug abuse, or depression.

Mental illnesses in young people

Like adults, mental illnesses can affect kids and teens from all family types and cultural backgrounds. In Ireland, about one in ten children and young people suffer from one form of mental health problem or another, and these are often a direct response to what is happening in their lives. Kids and teens in certain

situations, such as those with a family history of mental illness, can be at higher risk for mental illnesses.

Many mental illnesses show up before the age of 18, and so they impact on development, school performance and relationships. If they are not treated early, they can affect the person for the rest of their lives.

Can mental illness be prevented?

Mental illness can be prevented. Prevention efforts usually focus on addressing risk factors such as trauma that can cause children, youths and young adults to develop mental health problems. It can also be treated. Early identification and effective interventions are the keys to successfully treating the disorder. Mental illness should never be left untreated as this can lead to unnecessary suffering now and in the future.

There is a direct relationship between physical health and mental health, and the things that affect physical health can also greatly impact mental health. In particular, it is important to pay attention to diet, exercise and sleep.

Diet, exercise and sleep

Good habits in these three areas are very important and helpful for your mental health. While you may not need to be a on a specific diet, you do need to ensure that you are eating healthily. Junk food, processed foods and foods high in sugar or fat should be avoided as much as possible. Recent studies suggest that eating junk food raises the risk of depression, which is one of the most common mental illnesses.

Similarly, exercise is one of the best weapons for protecting your mental health. Regular exercise releases feel-good hormones like endorphins and serotonin, which improve your mood and your emotional and physical well-being. Regular

exercise helps reduce your stress levels and they make it easier for you to manage the symptoms of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. When you can, exercise outdoors as sunshine also does your body good.

Sleep is equally important in preventing mental illness. When you get plenty of rest, you are better able to cope with stress. Not enough sleep affects your ability to think clearly, and your feeling of well-being. Caffeine (which can be in soft/fizzy drinks) and alcohol can affect your ability to sleep and starring at screens just before bed can also make it difficult to sleep well or enjoy restful sleep. Minimising these will have a positive impact your mental health.

How are mental illnesses diagnosed?

Health professionals usually diagnose mental illness through a combination of:

› Taking medical history
› Doing a physical exam and possibly lab tests, and
› Conducting a psychological evaluation where you will be required to answer questions about your emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

Treatment

Mental health problems can be treated. There are various treatments available, depending on the mental illness and we will discuss some of these in the sections on specific mental disorders below. It is important to know that what works for one person may not work for another. Some treatments are more successful when combined with others, and some treatments may be more effective at different stages of the person's life than at other times. Experts say that a well-informed patient is probably the best judge of what treatment suits them best.