

Here is some information about schizophrenia from the Canadian Mental Health Association, The Schizophrenia Society of Canada, and The Mental Health Commission of Canada.

- Schizophrenia is a very complex mental illness. It affects the way you understand and interact with the world around you.
- Schizophrenia affects an estimated one person in 100. It can affect anyone, regardless of background or lifestyle.
- Individuals with schizophrenia may start to experience problems concentrating, thinking, communicating clearly, or taking part in their usual activities. At the most intense points during the illness, people may experience breaks from reality called psychosis. These could be sensations that aren't real, such as hearing voices, and strong beliefs that aren't true, such as believing they can control others' minds.
- Each person's experience with schizophrenia is unique. Some people only experience one episode in their lifetime, while others experience many episodes. Some people experience periods of wellness between episodes, while others may experience episodes that last a long time.
- No matter how someone experiences schizophrenia, early treatment can help reduce the impact of episodes in the future.
- No one knows exactly what causes schizophrenia or why it can affect people so differently. Some of the factors involved might be an individual's genes, brain structure, and life events.
- Currently there is no way to prevent schizophrenia and there is no cure. However, there are good and effective treatment options. The outlook for people with schizophrenia continues to improve. Eliminating stigma about mental illness is also an important part of helping people with schizophrenia to have a better quality of life.

Here are ten common myths about mental illnesses.

Myth #1: Mental illnesses aren't real illnesses.

Fact: The words used to describe mental illnesses have changed greatly over time. What hasn't changed is the fact that mental illnesses are not the regular ups and downs of life. Mental illnesses create distress, don't go away on their own, and are real health problems with effective treatments. When someone breaks their arm, we wouldn't expect them to just "get over it." Nor would we blame them if they needed a cast, sling, or other aid in their daily life while they recovered.

Myth #2: Mental illness will never affect me.

Fact: All of us may be affected by mental illness. Researchers estimate that as many as one in five Canadians will experience a mental illness at some point in their life. Those who do not experience a mental illness themselves may have family members, friends, or co-workers who will experience challenges.

Myth #3: Mental illnesses are just an excuse for poor behaviour.

Fact: It's true that some people who experience a mental illness may act in ways that are unexpected or seem strange to others. We need to remember that the illness, not the person, is behind these behaviours. No one chooses to experience a mental illness. People who experience a change in their behaviour due to a mental illness may feel extremely embarrassed or ashamed around others. It's also true that people with a mental illness are like anyone else: they may make poor choices or do something unexpected for reasons unrelated to symptoms of their illness.

Myth #4: Bad parenting causes mental illnesses.

Fact: No one factor can cause mental illnesses. Mental illnesses are complicated conditions that arise from a combination of genetics, biology, environment, and life experiences. Family members and loved ones do have a big role in support and recovery.

Myth #5: People with mental illnesses are violent and dangerous.

Fact: Researchers agree that mental illnesses are not a good predictor of violence. In fact, people who experience a mental illness are no more violent than those who do not.

It's also important to note that people who experience mental illnesses are much more likely to be victims of violence than to be violent.

Myth #6: People don't recover from mental illnesses.

Fact: People can and do recover from mental illnesses. Today, there are many different kinds of treatments, services, and supports that can help. No one should expect to feel unwell forever. The fact is, people who experience mental illnesses can and do lead productive, engaged lives. They work, volunteer, or contribute their unique skills and abilities to their communities.

Even when people experience mental illnesses that last for a long time, they can learn how to manage their symptoms so that they can get back to their goals. If someone continues to experience many challenges, it may be a sign that different approaches or supports are needed.

Myth #7: People who experience mental illnesses are weak and can't handle stress.

Fact: Stress affects well-being, but this is true for everyone. People who experience mental illnesses may actually be better at managing stress than people who haven't experienced mental illnesses. Many people who experience mental illnesses learn skills like stress management and problem solving so that they can take care of stress before it affects their well-being. Taking care of yourself and asking for help when you need it are signs of strength, not weakness.

Myth #8: People who experience mental illnesses can't work.

Fact: Whether you realize it or not, workplaces are filled with people who have experienced mental illnesses. Having a mental illness doesn't mean that a person is no longer capable of working. Some people benefit from changes at work to support their goals, but many people work with few supports from their employer. Most people who experience serious mental illnesses want to work, but face systemic barriers to finding and keeping meaningful employment.

Myth #9: Kids can't have a mental illness like depression. Those are adult problems.

Fact: Even children can experience mental illnesses. In fact, many mental illnesses first appear when a person is young. Mental illnesses may look different in children than in adults, but they are a real concern. Mental illnesses can have an impact on the way young people learn and build skills, which can lead to challenges in the future. Unfortunately, many children don't receive the help they need.

Myth #10: Everyone gets depressed as they grow older. It's just part of the aging process.

Fact: Depression is never an unavoidable part of aging. Older adults may have a greater risk of depression because they experience so many changes in roles and social networks. If an older adult experiences depression, they need the same support as anyone else.

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This list suggests ten approaches that help people cope with stressful times. See if you can add to it.

Next, think about how you could teach people about at least one coping method from the list. You may choose to make a poster, a webpage, a skit, a commercial, a painting, a poem, a short story ... the possibilities are endless!

1. Learn more about mental illness. If someone you know has been diagnosed with a mental illness, find out more about what to expect and how you can help.
2. Keep a journal. If you or someone you care about seems to be exhibiting signs of illness, keep track of things that concern you. Write down the date, the event, and why you are concerned.
3. Stay connected. If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, be sure to stay connected to your support team.
4. Practise relaxation techniques. Breathe deeply, go to a “happy place” (even if it’s in your mind’s eye), write down or illustrate your feelings, take a walk.
5. Keep physically active. Research supports the fact that physical activity can reduce stress. Get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day! Also, remember to balance your passive time (such as time spent with computers, TV, video games, etc.) with activity. Consult the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines published by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.
6. Feed your body! Nutritious foods are important. Consult *Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating* and make sure that you practise balance, moderation, and variety in your food choices.
7. Find a hobby—dance, sing, draw, paint, play music, or build models! Keep busy and try to explore new challenges.
8. Love your pet (or someone else’s). Pets can truly be your best friend.
9. Get enough sleep. Growing bodies need about 8.5 to 9 hours of sleep a night!
10. Smile! Share your smile with someone else!

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

As part of our learning about literacy and mental health, we have been using a series called *Well Aware* that combines engaging texts written by award-winning Canadian authors with lessons that connect to strategies students can use on a daily basis to manage stressful situations.

One of these texts, titled *Upside Down*, is a first-person account of a family's experience with a serious mental illness. Two of Clem Martini's brothers were diagnosed with schizophrenia. Clem felt overwhelmed and wondered, *What can I do? How can I help?* In this text, he offers answers he has found to those questions over the course of his family's journey with mental illness. It has been a difficult journey, including the devastating suicide of one brother. Ultimately, however, the message is one of hope and of finding ways to be resilient and move forward. Everyone who reads *Upside Down* will be affected by the story it tells, and we hope this will lead to deeper understandings, reduced anxiety about mental illness, and compassion.

As students work with this text, they will discuss and debunk misconceptions about mental illnesses and explore coping strategies that are helpful for individuals and families experiencing difficult situations. They will consider ways to support themselves and others when facing tough challenges—especially the important step of seeking and accepting help.

As caring adults, we all want to help our young people develop the skills necessary to be able to cope and thrive in all situations. As teachers, we cannot diagnose or counsel students about specific mental health issues. What we can and will do, however, is open the doors to talking about mental health issues without shame, stigma, or judgment.

As part of our team, thank you for connecting with us concerning this important topic and please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss this work further.

Sincerely,