

Pfizer Australia

# HEALTH REPORT

ISSUE #36



## GETTING HELP EARLY FOR MENTAL ILLNESS

This edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report looks at how well people recognise and seek help for the early signs of mental illness.

Seventy-six percent of people surveyed were unfamiliar with the symptoms of mental illness, and seven-in-ten people believe that the general community is not very understanding and supportive of people with a mental illness. A further one-in-ten think that the general community's attitude is 'not understanding and supportive at all'.

The conclusion of this latest Pfizer Australia Health Report, produced in partnership with SANE Australia, is that most Australians are unlikely to recognise when someone is unwell and that poor community attitudes about mental illness make it less likely that people with symptoms would seek medical help early.

The good news is that almost all of those surveyed feel that it is important to identify and treat someone who has a mental illness

as soon as possible. The more well informed someone is about mental illness and able to detect the signs, the more likely they are to think early treatment is important.

The report's findings are based on responses from 1,499 Australians aged 18 years and over. The research was conducted in August 2006 by independent consultants Stollznow Research in consultation with SANE Australia.

The Pfizer Australia Health Report is produced monthly, in collaboration with health consumer organisations and medical experts, and provides information and news to help you and your family live a healthier, happier lifestyle.

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# WHAT ARE THE EARLY SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS?

The early signs of mental illness are usually identified by changes in the way someone feels, thinks or behaves that are out of character for that person.

Mental illness is a collective term for a range of medical conditions that affect 1 in 5 Australians, often disrupting a person's ability to function in their everyday life. Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common mental illnesses, affecting 18% in a 12-month period. Three percent of people will have bipolar disorder or schizophrenia at some stage in their lives, where there is a loss of contact with reality during episodes of illness.

Friends and family are in the best position to notice when someone is becoming unwell. Mental illness can be a difficult thing to talk about, so it can be really helpful for someone who is unwell to hear that people are worried about them. It's important to put yourself in their shoes and be non-judgmental, just as you would for any other illness. This approach may encourage that person to get help. Many people are afraid of talking about the possibility that they may have a mental illness for fear of losing friends, losing their job and being vilified.

Avoid diagnosing mental illness in another person. This is a complex process and there may be other underlying medical conditions with similar symptoms, so a visit to a GP for a full check up is essential.

In the early stages of a mental illness, a person can experience some of the symptoms listed below. Of concern are changes that have continued for several weeks and aren't usual for that person where they:

- Feel extremely sad or tearful
- Have changes to usual sleep patterns
- Lose interest and motivation
- Abuse drugs and alcohol



- Withdraw from social life; spend less time with friends and family
- See, hear, feel, smell or taste something that no one else can
- Think they are worthless and have low self-esteem
- Have changes in appetite or weight
- Have difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Become so anxious they have difficulty breathing, start to sweat or choke, or feel faint and shaky
- Experience frequent health complaints like headaches, stomach aches or general aches and pains
- Show a lack of inhibitions and have a tendency to do things they would not normally do
- Uncharacteristically neglect household, personal or parental responsibilities, personal hygiene or appearance
- Behave in a risky manner
- Performance in studies or at work worsens, or they suddenly resign from a job
- Make comments about suicide, talk about feeling hopeless, or say life is not worth living.

If you see a number of these behaviours, seek medical assessment.



# The Stigma of Mental Illness

People showing early signs of mental illness can be reluctant to seek medical treatment due to a perceived lack of public sympathy towards these conditions, according to new research. Alarmingly, four out of five Australians believe the general community is not understanding and supportive of people with mental illness.

The research, conducted for SANE Australia and published in this Pfizer Australia Health Report, also found that one-in-three of those surveyed were unsure how a friend or colleague would react to them on hearing that they had a mental illness. Their biggest concerns were that sharing this information with others could lead to being sacked from their job, discriminated against and mocked, or losing important relationships.

Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia, says: "It is sobering to learn that in 2007 people may not seek help for early symptoms of mental illness out of fear. These prevailing attitudes are particularly tragic, as we know that early intervention for mental illness is crucial to reduce the numbers of people who die by suicide."

Despite the apparent lack of public sympathy for people with mental illnesses, the research did detect some positive trends. More than four-in-five Australians recognise mental illness as a medical condition affecting the way someone acts and feels.



This is good news as traditionally many people in the community did not regard mental illness as being 'real' in the same way as a physical illness.

If you notice that someone's sadness won't go away or that something is not quite right, call the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) or read the Factsheets on the SANE website at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org) for further information about the early signs of mental illness.



This Report has been produced in partnership with SANE Australia. SANE is an independent national charity helping people affected by mental illness through education, applied research and campaigning for improved services and attitudes. SANE conducts innovative programs to improve the lives of people living with mental illness, their family and friends. It operates a national Freecall service: **1800 18 SANE (7263)**, an online Helpline, and an award-winning website, which help thousands of people each year. More information about SANE Australia and early signs of mental illness can be found at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)



# AUSTRALIANS' ATTITUDES TO MENTAL ILLNESS



More than four-in-five Australians say they feel 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable' talking about mental illness, suggesting that there is broad acceptance of it within the community. Those surveyed feel people in a one-on-one situation are supportive and understanding of mental illness, but that they believe general community attitudes are stigmatising.

People who know the early signs of mental illness are more comfortable talking about it than those who don't. Unsurprisingly, people who are well informed about mental illness are more likely to be willing to help those affected.

While most Australians understand that early identification and treatment are important, many do not feel they are able to recognise

the signs, or are not aware that there are any symptoms to look for.

A good first step in learning about the symptoms of and treatments for a range of mental illnesses is to visit the SANE website. Visitors can read and download accurate, user-friendly Factsheets, email questions confidentially to the SANE Helpline, buy educational resources from the online bookshop, and learn how they can help to reduce stigma and discrimination.

Join SANE StigmaWatch to help reduce stigma in the community at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org). The program monitors media portrayals of mental illness and suicide to ensure they are accurate and respectful.

## How to help

Getting help early for mental illness, as with all illnesses, is important. If an illness is identified quickly there is a good chance of managing the symptoms with immediate treatment and without going into hospital. Prompt treatment helps a person to keep friends and maintain a good relationship with their family. It means they are less likely to spend time away from school or work and increases the likelihood of a good recovery.

Mental illness can be difficult to diagnose - there are no blood tests or scans as yet. A GP, psychiatrist or clinical psychologist usually diagnoses mental illness. A GP is usually the first person to contact and is used to hearing from people who are concerned about their mental health - so feel confident that your situation will not be unusual for them.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to encourage a person to visit the doctor because they may feel criticised, frightened or angry. Some people may have trouble explaining their problems because of anxiety and confused thinking. Others may not be able to recognise they are ill.

Encourage the person you are concerned about to think of the doctor as someone who can help and who will not judge. You may like to suggest that a trusted friend or family member support them when they visit the doctor. If your friend or family member is reluctant or refuses to get help themselves, you can consult with the doctor about your concerns and enlist their help to work out a plan. It may be possible and appropriate for the doctor to assess the person at home. If this is not possible, the doctor can still provide help and support to the family and others who are concerned. If the doctor



does not seem to understand, look for another who does.

Often the first step is the most difficult one. If you are very worried, make an appointment to talk about this problem, and if necessary book a longer appointment than usual.

The SANE Checklist pamphlets are helpful in identifying if someone has a mental illness. Call the SANE Helpline 1800 18 SANE (7263) to discuss your concerns and receive a free copy of the checklist.

# MENTAL ILLNESS IS TREATABLE

Mental illness can be treated and the good news is that many people who receive treatment recover well or even completely. However, as there are many different factors contributing to the development of an illness, it can sometimes be difficult to predict how, when, or to what degree someone is going to get better.

Treatment means all the different ways in which someone is helped to minimise the effects of the illness. There is a wide range of treatment options, and using a combination of them often produces the best results. Some options are counselling, medication, exercise, rehabilitation, supported accommodation and other community support programs. Nutrition and complementary therapies such as massage and acupuncture may also be helpful.

No two people respond to treatment in the same way, so treatments are individually tailored. It's important to persist in finding professional help that feels right and works well. Sometimes it takes a number of visits to various health professionals before you find the one who is right for you.

## Psychological treatment

A doctor, psychologist or other health professional can help a person understand factors which contribute to the way they feel and support them to try new strategies to improve the way they think, behave and interact with others. There are many types of psychological treatment that are proven to be effective. These often require a number of sessions over several months for best results. A course of psychological treatment provided through referral from a GP is now largely covered by Medicare.

## Medication

Keeping to a routine of taking medication is one of the most effective things a person can do to recover from mental illness. Medical



research shows that many mental illnesses are related to changes in our brain chemistry. Certain medications assist the brain to restore its usual chemical balance, so that the symptoms are reduced or even eliminated.

## Community support programs

Support programs are especially important for people with recurrent symptoms or who have a psychiatric disability. This support may include information; accommodation; help with finding suitable work, family training and education; psychosocial rehabilitation and support groups. Understanding and acceptance by the community is also very important.

## Where are people treated?

Clinical treatment generally takes place in the community. Hospital care can be provided when somebody is acutely ill and needs intensive care for a while. Anyone who has been diagnosed with a mental illness that requires treatment usually receives a range of clinical services in their own community.

*The SANE Guide to Medication and Other Treatments* explains clinical care, medication, support in the community and helping yourself. To order, visit the SANE Bookshop at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org) or call **1800 18 SANE (7263)**.

# How to help if someone is suicidal

Sometimes a mental illness is first recognised when a person talks about suicide. While half of those surveyed report knowing someone who has attempted to harm themselves or take their own life, three-in-five feel they don't know the signs that someone is thinking of suicide and don't know how to help.

If someone is considering taking their own life, you can help by showing concern and asking them direct questions about suicide. Your action may help them understand that there are other options – that they are not alone. It can also open the door for them to talk about their feelings and agree to get the help they need. If you believe someone is thinking about ending their life it's natural to feel panic or even want to avoid talking about it. However, there are a number of practical things you can do to help.

## 1. Tell them that you are concerned, and that you are there to help

## 2. Ask if they are thinking about suicide and if they have made any plans

- Talking about suicide will not make them go through with their plans
- Asking shows that you care
- Asking will help them talk about their feelings and plans – the first step to getting help.

## 3. Get help

- Tell them that there are other options to suicide
- Don't agree to keep their suicidal thoughts or plans a secret
- Don't assume they will get better without help or that they will seek help on their own.

## If someone is thinking about suicide, encourage them to:

- Make an appointment with a GP - suggest that someone goes along with them

- Contact a counsellor or employee assistance program, family member or friend
- Contact a specialist helpline for information and advice.

## If a plan to end their life has been made:

- Check if they are able to carry out this plan – do they have a time, place or method?
- Do what you can to keep them safe by removing access to items they plan to use
- Contact the Psychiatric Emergency Team at the local hospital and the police on 000, report that the person is suicidal, has made a plan, and you fear for their safety.

## 4. Take care of yourself too

- Look after yourself – it is emotionally demanding to support someone who is suicidal
- Find someone to talk things over with – colleagues, family, friends or a helpline.

## Someone is at increased risk when they:

- Talk about feeling hopeless and helpless
- Are socially isolated and have a recent loss – relationship, death, job
- Have made a previous suicide attempt
- Have a friend, family member or work colleague who has died by suicide
- Have a mental illness
- Behave in a risky manner – drugs, alcohol abuse, driving recklessly.

The SANE Guide to Staying Alive provides practical step-by-step advice for dealing with suicidal thoughts and behaviour.



## USEFUL CONTACTS

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### **SANE HELPLINE 1800 18 SANE (7263) OR [helpline@sane.org](mailto:helpline@sane.org)**

National Freecall 1800 and online service providing information and advice about all mental illnesses and referral to local services

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### **AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY: 1800 333 497**

Referral service to psychologists in your area

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### **CENTRELINK DISABILITY SERVICES AND CARERS LINE: 13 2717**

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### **IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE**

**POLICE: 000**

**LOCAL HOSPITAL PSYCHIATRIC EMERGENCY TEAM**

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### **24-HOUR CRISIS TELEPHONE COUNSELLING**

**LIFELINE: 13 11 14**

**KIDS HELPLINE: 1800 55 1800**

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