

Mental Illness



Mental Illness (MI) refers to a variety of conditions that affect how individuals experience emotions, think and behave. These changes can lead to distress and impact one's ability to engage in social, academic, and family life. It is important to recognize that MI can stem from a complex interplay of biological, psychological and social factors, resulting in unique experience of each person.

Common MI include:

- Anxiety Disorders
- Bipolar and Related Disorders
- Depressive Disorders
- Disruptive, Impulsive-Control, and Conduct Disorders
- Dissociative Disorders
- Elimination Disorders
- Feeding and Eating Disorders
- Gender Dysphoria
- Neurocognitive Disorders
- Neurodevelopment Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive Related Disorders
- Paraphilic Disorders
- Personality Disorders
- Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders
- Sexual Dysfunctions
- Sleep-Wake Disorders
- Somatic Symptom and Related Disorders
- Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders
- Trauma- and Stress-Related Disorders

Individuals with MI may experience the following conditions:

Emotional Experiences

- Experience persistent feelings of sadness, low mood, or anxiety
- Feel overwhelmed by worries or engage in self-blame, affecting perceptions of self, others, and situations

Cognitive Patterns

- Encounter thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideations during tough times
- Experience unusual sensory phenomena, such as hearing voices
- Find it difficult to concentrate or engage in effective decision-making

Behavioral Responses

- Experience a decline in academic performance due to emotional distress
- Experience sleep disturbances that interfere with daily functioning
- Increase absences from classes or social activities
- Lose interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Notice changes in appetite leading to significant weight loss or gain
- Tend to withdraw from social situations, exacerbating feelings of isolation

Diagnosis and Treatment



In Hong Kong, diagnosis of MI is often made by mental health profession including psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. Holistic and comprehensive interventions can be arranged by a professional team including psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, social workers and qualified therapists. Early intervention and personalised treatment is helpful in assisting the individual to maintain wellness, manage symptoms and distress, enabling and empowering individuals to be actively engaged in life and enhance their overall quality of life.

Treatment for people with MI is tailored to each person depending on their circumstances and needs. Medications and psychotherapies or the combination of both may be used to help the person improve mental health and relieve the distress. Ongoing support may also be crucial for some individuals to adapt and thrive as they grow, and their circumstances evolve.

Supporting Students with Mental Illness

University life can present unique challenges for individuals with MI, particularly in social communications, academic performance, and emotion well-being. Helpful tips may include:

Social Communication

- ✓ Acknowledge and respect the individuals' pacing
- ✓ Acknowledge and validate each other's feelings; allow emotions and feelings to be expressed
- ✓ Encourage help seeking behaviors when needed, such as from counseling support service
- ✓ Offer appropriate support, be present and refrain from prematurely taking on a problem-solving role
- ✓ Practice active listening with a non-judgmental attitude, allow them to share their thoughts

Academic Support

- ✓ Arrange preferential seating to accommodate their needs
- ✓ Be flexible with attendance policy to accommodate medical needs
- ✓ Provide access to lecture recordings to facilitate revision/learning after classes
- ✓ Provide a quiet, distraction-free examination setting
- ✓ Provide flexibility in assignment due dates
- ✓ Provide students with clearly defined expectations to reduce anxiety and uncertainty

Psychological Support

- ✓ Refer to psychological counseling service for students' mental health and adversity coping capability

No health without mental health. It is vital to recognize that experiencing mental health challenges is a common experience and not a source of shame. Just as experiencing physical health issues, we can seek help from professionals for appropriate treatment.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>