Phobia

This is characterised by fear of an object or situation that is disproportionate to any real danger posed by the object or situation concerned. The person may organise his or her life to avoid the source of this anxiety.

Anxiety Disorders

There are a wide range of anxiety disorders where anxiety issues and situations make everyday life a struggle. Symptoms vary from person to person, but can include feeling irritable or worried, and having trouble concentrating or sleeping.

Recovery

Many people can and do recover from mental illness, especially those that have the support of family and friends.

Please visit the Scottish recovery network to access people's stories and experiences of mental illness: www.scottishrecovery.net

Forensic Network

7. Mental Illness & Diagnosis

Mental Illness

Mental illness can affect people from all walks of life and can fluctuate between periods when a person feels well and able to manage, and periods of being less well. People experience mental illness in very different ways and so should always seek medical help quickly to ensure that they receive the most appropriate advice and treatment.

Diagnosis

Mental illness cannot be diagnosed by a physical test, and reaching a diagnosis is not a simple process. People referred to mental health services do not always have a definitive diagnosis but can still receive treatment to relieve symptoms. These symptoms may change over time and present in different ways, making it difficult to tell conditions apart.

A psychiatrist diagnoses mental illness and will do so if someone's thought patterns, perceptions, emotions and behaviours have changed significantly and have followed a recognisable pattern over a period of time.

Most Common Mental Illness Diagnoses

The list below is not exhaustive but provides some information on some of the key terms used.

Psychosis: Is a feature of serious mental illness. It is a term used to describe symptoms where a person experiences the loss of a sense of reality, and the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. The main symptoms are hallucinations or delusions.

Schizophrenia: is one of the more common serious mental health conditions. Around 1 in 100 people will experience it in their lifetime. Features of schizophrenia are often described as either 'positive' in that they are additional features to the person's life, or 'negative' in that they seemingly take something away from a person or suppress part of the person's personality.

Positive symptoms may be - delusions (sometimes paranoia), hallucinations and strange thinking (thought disorder).

Negative symptoms may be - withdrawal from social engagement, neglecting physical appearance and lack of interest in life or things that otherwise would normally be of interest to the person.

Bipolar Disorder: Previously known as 'manic depression', bipolar disorder is characterised by episodes of extreme highs and lows (mania and depression). The pattern of mood swings can differ widely between people, and not everyone experiences both highs and lows. During periods of mania a person can lose normal inhibitions, spend money irresponsibly, or make unrealistic plans.

Schizo-affective Disorder: This term is used when there are elements of both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder present at the same time, or within a few days of each other.

Personality Disorder: Affects how a person feels, thinks and behaves. There are several types of personality disorder, and some involve symptoms of psychosis. A personality disorder can cause severe disruption in the personal, social and work life of the person, and those around them. It can be characterised by extreme outbursts of emotion, or volatile behaviour.

Borderline Personality Disorder is a type of personality disorder characterised by emotional instability and behaviours which transgress cultural norms. The person is likely to have a distorted self-image, difficulty in maintaining relationships, and extremes in emotion and behaviour. An individual may have a fear of abandonment but can also drive people away.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: Consists of disturbing and persistent thoughts that make a person feel anxious and can lead to repetitive actions or patterns of behaviour.

Depression: This is a physical and mental state characterised by low mood and low emotions. There can be physiological changes as well as mental changes, such as changes in sleep patterns, appetite and energy levels. Depression can be classified as mild, moderate or severe.