

What is Mental Distress?

People with mental distress can experience problems in the way they think, feel or behave. In other words, their thinking, feeling and behavior is all mixed up. This significantly interferes with their relationships with other people, their work, and enjoyment of life.

Having mental distress can be difficult for the person and difficult for the family. But, it is not something to be ashamed of.

What Causes Mental Distress?

It is important to understand that having mental distress is no-one's fault. It is sometimes believed that it is caused by bad blood, punishment or the evil eye. On the other hand, doctors believe that there are a number of factors which may lead to mental distress:

- Chemical imbalance in the brain
- Stress and everyday problems
- Exposure to severely distressing experiences

It is difficult to be absolutely sure about the causes of mental distress in all situations. Sometimes physical distresses may have psychiatric symptoms.

Is Mental Distress Inherited?

Research indicates that some people may have a genetic predisposition to develop mental distress. Because there are many complex factors, it is advisable to discuss this with your doctor.

Is Mental Distress Contagious?

Mental distress is not like a cold or the measles, it is not contagious.

What Are The Main Types Of Mental Distress?

Anxiety Disorders
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
Depression
Manic Depressive Distress
Schizophrenia

■ **Anxiety Disorders**

A person can experience extreme distress, panic or worry.

Common symptoms include:

- high blood pressure,
- increased heart beat,
- upset stomach,
- tremors,
- muscle tension,
- feeling restless,
- sleeplessness.

■ **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Common symptoms include:

- nightmares,
- having a lot of thoughts of the trauma you suffered,
- sleeplessness,
- startling easily.

■ **Depression**

Depression affects a person's mood.

Mild Depression: Many people experience mild depression in their lives for example, sadness or not wanting to do anything.

Major Depression: Symptoms may include:

- extreme sadness or despair;
- a loss of interest in doing anything for example work, hobbies or hygiene;
- sleeping problems;
- loss of appetite;
- weight loss;
- lack of energy;
- suicidal feelings or wanting to die;
- sense of guilt;
- hopelessness;
- feeling worthless

Depression, whether mild or major, can be the result of reactions to life events for example the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, or trying to adjust to life in a new country. However, it can also have no known external causes.

If you are uncertain of the severity of the depression please seek professional advice.

■ **Manic Depressive Distress**

This affects a person's mood. A person may have extreme mood swings of highs and lows.

Symptoms of a 'low' mood may include:

- feelings of failure or unworthiness;
- suicidal feelings or wanting to die;
- depressed mood;
- sleeping problems;
- poor appetite.

Symptoms of a 'high' mood may include:

- irritability,
- speech may be jumbled because of speaking too quickly;
- impulsiveness;
- belief in being someone important or having great powers.

A person with manic depressive distress (also called 'Bipolar Disorder') may experience psychosis.

Psychosis: This occurs when a person loses touch with reality or is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy.

■ **Schizophrenia**

The most common psychotic disorder is schizophrenia.

Symptoms may include:

- feeling confused or depressed;
- withdrawal from family, friends, and reduced social contact;
- hearing voices of people who are not present or that no-one else can hear;
- believing that people are wanting to cause them harm;
- belief of being someone famous or powerful;
- feelings and thoughts may not match, for example, laughing at a sad thought for no apparent reason;
- inability to perform everyday tasks, for example, looking after personal hygiene or diet.

What Can Be Done To Help A Person?

People experiencing these symptoms should seek medical help. Mental distress is like a physical illness. It is important to receive treatment in order to get well. If a person receives treatment at an early stage, they may be able to recover more quickly. One of the following or a combination can assist the person:

- Medication can help with some forms of mental distress. It helps to control symptoms.
- Support and counseling is talking to someone to deal with problems, to help to cope with the distress and the symptoms.
- Support Group Meetings and being with other people with mental distress. Families getting together who have a member with mental distress. These groups give people the chance to share experiences, learn about mental distress and support each other.

The aim of this help is to restore respect, dignity and confidence to the mentally distressed person.

Where Can I Get This Help?

- Primary Care Provider

Your doctor can check to make sure there are no underlying physical problems. They can medically treat the mentally distressed person. Your doctor can also refer you to other appropriate services.

- Community Mental Health Clinics

Staff include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, occupational therapists, social workers. They offer different forms of help to the person with mental distress and/or their families. This can include crisis assistance.

- Psychiatric Hospitals

If someone is very sick they may need to be in hospital. People may be taken to hospital involuntarily if there is a risk that they can hurt themselves or others. Once a person is admitted to hospital, their mental health is reviewed regularly. The aim of a hospital admission is to restore a person's mental health as soon as possible so that they can return home.

Will My Problem Be Kept Confidential?

When seeing a health professional, information about your problem cannot be given to anyone else without your permission. If an interpreter is present they also must keep the information confidential. It is important for a person with mental distress to receive treatment in order to get well. The longer the distress remains untreated the longer it can take for the person to recover.

Where Can I Get More Information?

Ask your primary care doctor for more information.

If you, a family member or a friend has mental distress that is very severe and your primary care doctor is not available, you should go to the nearest hospital emergency room.

This information was adapted from a brochure titled "What is Mental Illness" produced by ADEC (Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities) Victoria, Australia.