

## The Facts

Challenging the myths and misunderstandings about mental health is a crucial part of reducing discrimination.

- 1. Myth: Mental health problems are rare.**  
**Fact:** No, they're much more common than most people think. Up to one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year<sup>1</sup>, taking up between 10 and 20 percent of GPs' time.<sup>2</sup>
- 2. Myth: It could never happen to me.**  
**Fact:** There is no divide between people with mental health problems and everyone else. Although there are some risk factors – from bereavement to genetics- mental ill health can affect anyone.
- 3. Myth: People with mental health problems are a danger to the public.**  
**Fact:** No. They are much more likely to harm themselves than anyone else. The public is more at risk from young men under the influence of alcohol.<sup>3</sup>
- 4. Myth: More and more murders are being committed by people with mental health problems.**  
**Fact:** Despite a lot of sensational media coverage, the proportion of murders committed by people with mental health problems has in fact fallen steadily over the last fifty years.<sup>4</sup>
- 5. Myth: 'Mental illness' and learning disability are similar things.**  
**Fact:** No, they're very different. Learning disabilities (e.g. Down's Syndrome) result from genetic or development factors, or damage to the brain, often at birth. They affect a person's IQ, usually permanently, and usually can't be controlled without treatment. Mental health problems (e.g. depression, schizophrenia) often don't appear in childhood, aren't a result of damage to the brain and don't usually have a permanent affect on IQ. It's possible to completely recover from mental health problems, and many people do.
- 6. Myth: "It's their own fault" or "people who are depressed should snap out of it".**  
**Fact:** Mental health problems aren't self-inflicted, any more than physical illness is. People with depression have serious, persistent symptoms which they can't change, no matter how hard they try. If untreated, depression can have serious consequences: **70%** of suicides are committed by people who have experienced some form of depression.<sup>5</sup>
- 7. Myth: People with mental health problems never recover.**

**Fact:** With the right support and treatment, most people with mental health problems get better, and many recover completely. For instance, around a quarter of people with schizophrenia will eventually recover.<sup>6</sup> Only a small handful of conditions are untreatable – but even here a lot can be done to help people cope and live as normal a life as possible.

**8. Myth: People with schizophrenia have a split personality.**

**Fact:** This false belief is based on the idea that the behaviour and personality of people with schizophrenia swing dramatically between normal and dangerously disturbed. Such “Jekyll and Hyde” swings in personality are entirely fictional, and don’t occur in schizophrenia, or any other mental health problem. Schizophrenia is not uncommon, and the majority of people with schizophrenia live ordinary lives.

**9. Myth: You can tell someone with a mental health problem from how they look or behave.**

**Fact:** You would hardly ever know from the outside that someone is experiencing a mental health problem. Yes, there are signs and symptoms, but even the professionals can take a long time to make a full diagnosis.

**10. Myth: Teenagers don’t suffer from ‘real’ mental health problems – they’re just moody.**

**Fact:** No. Around one in ten children and young people experience mental health problems severe enough to need professional help.<sup>7</sup> The suicide rate for young men has risen by 170% since 1985.<sup>8</sup>

**References:**

<sup>1</sup>The Mental Health Foundation, based on data derived from Goldberg, D. & Huxley, P., *Mental illness in the Community*, 1980 and Goldberg, D. *Filters to Care*, in *Indicators for Mental Health in the Population*, Jenkins, R. & Griffiths, S. (ed), The Stationary Office, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Office of Health Economics, *Mental Health in the 1990s: From custody to care?*, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Pepper, J. Sayce, L., Strong, S., Willmot, J. & Haines, M., *Tall Stories From the Back Yard*. Mind, 1997.

<sup>4</sup>Taylor, P. & Gunn, J., Institute of Psychiatry Research, 1999.

<sup>5</sup>Mind, *Key Facts about suicide*

<sup>6</sup>National Schizophrenia Fellowship, *Diagnosis and Prognosis: will treatment cure the illness?*

<sup>7</sup>Scott, S., *Memorandum submitted to the House of Commons Select Committee*. Minutes of Evidence, Thursday 24 October 1996.

<sup>8</sup>*Young Men Speak Out: young men’s views about depression, suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide*. The Samaritans, 1999.

