

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS



As of 2017, more than 792 million people or roughly 10.7% of the global population suffer from mental health disorders. A study released by the Health Ministry in 2018 concluded that Namibia has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, ranked fourth in Africa and eleventh globally. The Covid-19 pandemic only exacerbated this epidemic. If you do not experience mental health issues yourself, you likely know at least one person who does.

Mental health disorders are not a sign of weakness, nor can they be treated by ‘toughing it out.’ Mental health disorders are medical problems, just like asthma or diabetes. In many cases, mental health issues require treatment, whether through deliberate lifestyle changes, medication, therapy, or a combination of these.

### MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Millions of people are pushing through what often feels like a struggle against themselves and millions more are trying to understand. But there’s a gap between those who understand and those who do not—awareness is the first step to closing that gap. Mental illness affects everybody regardless of race, colour, gender, age, or nationality. Some mental illnesses can be cured, while other conditions can be rehabilitated to sustain life and improve the quality of life. Outcome of treatment depends on early detection and intervention, proper follow-up, and rehabilitation.

If you struggle from any mental health disorders, remember you are not alone.



Please note: This article is for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health providers with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

### TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Mental health issues encompass a variety of symptoms. Common disorders include anxiety, depression, bipolar, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and eating disorders. While anxiety, sadness, and fear are common emotions, mental health disorders last at least six months and present in a manner that interferes with daily life.

Mental health disorders also can be high-functioning or debilitating. Some people may experience symptoms so severe that they are unable to participate in activities of everyday life. Others look fine on the outside but are struggling underneath a composed exterior.



## Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and phobia disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

### Common symptoms of anxiety include:

- Persistent excessive worry, restlessness, fatigue, and irritability
- Panic attacks, which are uncontrolled, sudden bouts of extreme fear, with heart palpitations, elevated heart rate, sweating, shaking, and shortness of breath.
- Phobia disorders manifest as intense and sometimes irrational fear of certain situations or objects, including social interactions, flying, and needles.



## Depression disorders

Depressive disorder is a medical issue that causes sadness, loss of interest, and decreased ability to function.

### Symptoms of depression may include:

- Sadness and/or depressed mood
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Fatigue
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Thoughts of suicide or death

Other depression disorders include postpartum depression and seasonal affective disorder. Both postpartum depression and seasonal affective disorder are triggered by very particular events. Postpartum depression occurs during or after pregnancy, in part because of the sudden hormonal changes. The seasonal affective disorder occurs when less sunlight in the winter months triggers temporary depression.



## Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder has some similar symptoms to depression but is categorized separately. Bipolar disorder involves extreme changes in mood and energy that affect daily life. There are multiple subtypes of bipolar disorder; the most common alternates between manic (very excitable, energized behaviour) and depressive episodes.



## Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is one of the more severe mental illnesses. Untreated schizophrenia can disable a person. However, like many mental illnesses, schizophrenia does respond to appropriate medical interventions. One of the first signs of schizophrenia is a psychotic episode, in which an individual may struggle to discern what is real and what is not.

### Schizophrenia symptoms may also include:

- Alterations in the five senses
- Abnormal thoughts and behaviours
- Hallucinations
- Delusions and paranoia
- Changes in speech patterns
- Loss of motivation and enjoyment in daily activities
- Reduction in expression and speaking
- Inability to concentrate and process information



## Post-traumatic stress disorder

People often associate PTSD with war veterans. While this demographic is very prone to PTSD, it can affect anyone who has experienced an event they perceived as traumatic. PTSD is a chronic response to a scary or life-threatening event.

### Symptoms of PTSD may include:

- Flashbacks, bad dreams, and terrifying thoughts related to the traumatic event
- Avoidance of people, places, objects, or thoughts related to the traumatic event
- Highly reactive behaviour such as anger outbursts and being easily scared
- Having trouble sleeping
- Excessive guilt about the event
- Loss of interest in enjoyable activities



## Obsessive-compulsive disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder presents as having overwhelming obsessions and/or compulsions. For example, obsessions can manifest as repeated unwanted thoughts (called intrusive thoughts) about harming themselves or others, even if they don't want to. Compulsions can cause a person to engage in excessive counting or cleaning. Some people check to make sure they locked the door. People with OCD may check several times out of compulsion, even after seeing they locked the door.



## Eating disorders

Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorders are classified as mental illnesses. Some individuals with eating disorders have other mental disorders, including obsessive-compulsive disorder or anxiety disorder. Individuals who suffer from eating disorders may also be prone to suicidal thoughts or actions.

Anorexia nervosa involves the restriction of food and excessive exercise. Individuals with anorexia can become dangerously thin and are prone to medical complications, including infertility, heart damage, osteoporosis, anaemia, and muscle loss.

### Symptoms of anorexia nervosa may include:

- Frequently weighing themselves
- Restriction of food intake
- Excessive exercise
- Extreme thinness/emaciated frame

- Distorted body image, including continued attempts to lose weight even when underweight
- Fear of weight gain and having normal body weight
- Brittle nails and hair
- Dry, yellowed skin
- Constipation
- Lowered blood pressure and pulse
- Chronic lethargy

Bulimia and anorexia can simultaneously occur in some individuals. However, they present with distinct symptoms. A recurring cycle of binge-eating and compensatory purging are the primary markers of bulimia. Purging is done through forced vomiting, laxative use, meal restriction, or excessive exercise. Untreated bulimia can lead to dehydration, gastrointestinal disorders, electrolyte imbalances, heart attacks, or strokes. Unlike those with anorexia, some individuals with bulimia may maintain normal body weight.

**Symptoms of bulimia may include:**

- Episodes of bingeing followed by purging
- Sore throat
- Eroded tooth enamel

Binge-eating disorder is part of bulimia and also exists as its own disorder. An individual who has bulimia will eat excessive amounts of food; however, they do not attempt to purge it. Many individuals who suffer from binge-eating disorders become overweight or obese.

**Symptoms of binge-eating may include:**

- Eating large amounts of food in very short periods of time
- Eating very quickly
- Eating to the point of physical discomfort
- Secretive eating



## Autism Spectrum disorder

While other mental illnesses can occur at any point in life, autism spectrum disorder typically presents in the first two years. It is a lifelong disorder, but the quality of life can improve with treatment. The word spectrum indicates that the severity of autism can vary widely.

Autism spectrum disorder affects one's development, including social and functional development.

**Symptoms of autism spectrum may include:**

- Inability to make eye contact, look at others, or listen to others
- Not responding to their name
- Struggling with conversations and other social interactions
- Discontinuity between their verbal and nonverbal communication
- Fixation on one particular subject
- Inability to understand social cues or other people's perspectives
- Repetitive behaviours including repeating words or phrases
- Becomes upset at small alterations in routine
- Sensory sensitivity to light, noise, fabrics, etc.



## Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Some people may dismiss ADHD as a child being disorderly, but ADHD falls into the NIH's list of mental health disorders. ADHD affects people of all ages, although it is frequently diagnosed in children. ADHD is marked by intense levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Individuals can have only one or a combination of those three behaviours.

### ADHD symptoms may include:

- Careless mistakes at work or in school
- Problems focusing on conversations, lectures, reading, and meetings
- Struggling to follow directions
- Lacking organization and easily misplacing objects
- Easily distracted and forgetful
- Extreme levels of fidgeting
- Leaving seat or room during class or meetings
- Nonstop talking and moving
- Often interrupting in conversations and activities



## Substance abuse disorder

Substance abuse disorder occurs when a person is unable to control their use of addictive substances such as alcohol, medications, and drugs. On the severe end, substance abuse disorder can lead to addiction. As with eating disorders, individuals with substance abuse disorder may also have other mental health disorders such as depression, bipolar, PTSD, and anxiety.

## Treating mental health disorders

As with many medical problems, there are treatments for mental health disorders. Treatments include cognitive therapies, medications, and lifestyle changes. You may feel stuck if you have a mental health disorder, but you are not stuck nor are you alone.

**If you or someone you know is suffering from a mental health crisis, call the Lifeline/Childline Namibia at 061-226889.**

### Toll free lines in Namibia:

**Child Helpline: 116**

**Gender-based Violence: 106**

**Crises Line: 061-232221**