

what is  
**mental health?**


what is  
**mental illness?**

**Being mentally healthy is about being able to work and/or study to your full potential, cope with day-to-day life stresses, be involved in your community, and live your life in a free and satisfying way. A person who has good mental health has good emotional and social wellbeing and the capacity to cope with change and challenges.**

Mental health isn't a fixed state. It's not like one person has it now and always will, and another doesn't and never will. Mental health can be thought of as sitting on continuum (or scale) that we all move along, all the time, depending on how things are going for us.

Sometimes there are things totally out of our control that can have a big impact on our mental health. But there are also a lot of things in our control that we can do to support our mental health. We've tried to capture them in our seven tips for a healthy headspace. Generally, it's a good idea to incorporate these things into your everyday routine so that they become a normal part of life, and support you to handle challenges when they come up. They are:

- eat well
- stay connected to family and friends
- learn new ways to handle tough times
- reduce or cut out alcohol and other drugs
- stay active
- get enough sleep
- get in to life, and do what's important to you.

 **Knowing there are a lot of things in your control that can support your mental health is really empowering.**

This might also help you to understand what may have contributed to any hard times you've had in the past. Think of a time you had less sleep than usual or were having a lot of difficulty with family and friends – were you able to cope as well with the demands of daily life?

## The mental health continuum

The mental health continuum and **7 tips for a healthy headspace** can be used to help us understand that most of the time, mental illness doesn't appear out of nowhere. Most of the time there are early signs that we or someone else might be having a tough time.

If we're experiencing some early warning signs we might refer to these as mental health difficulties. These are very common, and usually don't last for long periods or have a big impact on our ability to do the things we want to do, or be the person we want to be. Even so, they are noticeably different from good mental health. So what are early warning signs? They can include things like:

- not enjoying, or not wanting to be involved in things that you would normally enjoy
- changes in appetite or sleeping patterns
- being easily irritated or having problems with friends and family for no reason
- finding that you aren't performing at school, TAFE, university or work like you used to
- being involved in risky behaviour that you would usually avoid, like taking drugs, having unprotected sex or drinking too much alcohol, or depending on substances to feel 'normal'
- feeling sad or down or crying for no apparent reason
- having trouble concentrating or remembering things
- having negative, distressing, bizarre or unusual thoughts
- feeling unusually stressed or worried
- feeling like things have changed or aren't quite right.

If someone has been experiencing these early warning signs for a longer period of time (at least two weeks), and they're having a big impact on their ability to do everyday things (like catch up with friends or go to work, study or school) then these might be signs of a mental illness. The term 'mental illness' is used to describe a recognised, diagnosed disorder. Someone can only be diagnosed with a mental illness after an assessment by a mental health professional.

Mental ill-health is anything from a mental health difficulty to a diagnosed mental illness. Almost half of the Australian population will experience some form of mental ill-health at some point in their life. When mental ill-health starts to impact your everyday life for more than a few weeks it's a good time to get some support.

## Causes of mental ill-health problems

It is often a combination of multiple factors that can cause us to experience mental health difficulties, or a mental illness. These can be:

- difficult life experiences: abuse, neglect or the loss of someone close to you
- individual factors: self-esteem, coping skills and thinking styles
- current circumstances: stress at school or work, money problems, difficult personal relationships or problems within your family
- biological factors: family history of mental ill-health.

## Looking after your mental health

There are a number of things you can do to look after and maintain your mental health. A helpful approach can be to incorporate the 7 tips for a healthy headspace into your everyday routine. This will leave you more prepared to cope with life's challenges, and can help you work through anything you might currently be experiencing.



**For more tips on looking after your mental health see our tips for a healthy headspace fact sheets.**

If you're concerned about your own or a friend's mental health and wellbeing, **headspace** or your local GP are a great place to go for help. Getting support can help you keep on track in your relationships and at school, study or work. The sooner you get help the sooner things can begin to improve.



**If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)**



**If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.**

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