

Intellectual disability and mental illness (dual disability)

Within the field of intellectual disability 'dual disability' is a term that refers to the coexistence of both intellectual disability and mental illness.

What is intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is a developmental disorder. People with intellectual disability have significantly more difficulty than others in learning new things, understanding concepts, solving problems, concentrating and remembering. Consequently, they require extra support to learn and achieve their full potential. Intellectual disability is often present from a person's early years. **It is not a mental illness.**

The international definition for intellectual disability has three criteria:

- Significant limitations in intelligence—that is an intelligence quotient (IQ) of about 70 or less as measured on a standardised intellectual assessment.
- Significant limitations in the skills needed to live and work in the community including difficulties with communication, self-care, social skills, safety and self-direction.
- Limitations in intelligence and living skills that are evident before the person is 18 years old.

All three criteria must be present for a person to be considered as having intellectual disability.

Refer to our information: *Intellectual disability: the facts* for more information.

What is mental illness?

Mental illness is a general term, referring to a group of illnesses which disrupt the person's ability to work and carry out normal daily living activities and engage in meaningful personal relationships. They can come and go in a person's life lasting from a few weeks or months to years. **It is not intellectual disability.**

Mental health is seen along a continuum ranging from good mental health to having a diagnosed and treated mental illness. Individuals will vary in their position along this continuum at different points in their life. A person with good mental health will feel in control of their emotions have a good ability to think and reason and have positive relationships with the people around them.

The exact causes of mental illness are unclear but there are several contributing factors that have been identified as predisposing people towards developing a mental illness.

Contributing factors can include the following:

- Chemical imbalances in the brain
- Family history of mental illness
- Stress
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Psychosocial factors such as poor physical health, trauma and abuses.

Mental health aspects of intellectual disability

Mental illness can and does affect people with intellectual disability, irrespective of their level of functioning. People with intellectual disability experience the same types of mental health problems as those without disability.

Between 20 and 35 per cent of people with intellectual disability will experience mental illness at some point in their life. This is a higher rate than the general population.

The presence of intellectual disability does pose particular difficulties when it comes to assessing and diagnosing mental illness. Several reasons for this include:

- The person may not be able to express symptoms or identify feelings during an assessment
- The tendency by others to attribute all forms of behaviour to the person's intellectual disability
- Unusual or infrequent presentation of signs and symptoms
- The possible masking affect of medications prescribed to manage physical and/or behavioural issues
- Inconsistent or missing historical information making it difficult to identify patterns of illness.

For people with intellectual disability, mental illness can seriously affect their daily functioning, jeopardise educational, vocational or housing opportunities and disrupt family, friend and community relations.

The high prevalence rate of mental illness in people with intellectual disability can be attributed to a number of factors:

- Fewer support networks and friendships
- Increased experiences of loss, rejection, isolation
- Increased likelihood of social disruptions and segregation
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of control over one's life
- Poorer coping skills and abilities to manage stress
- Poorer problem-solving and conflict resolution skills
- Biological vulnerabilities including sensory impairments
- Poor self-image and self-worth

- Living in inappropriate environments
- Exposure to abuse, trauma exploitation, bullying.

The Assessment Process

A mental health professional can assess the presence of mental illness in a person with intellectual disability. Consideration will be given to many factors, including:

- Is the person behaving in ways that are different to their usual behaviour for example changes to eating and/or sleeping patterns?
- Is the behaviour occurring across the majority of settings?
- The nature of the behaviour causing concern, including any available data
- Current living, social, educational and vocational arrangements
- Medical background, including any family history of mental illness
- Is the person thought to be experiencing emotional reactions that are out of keeping with the situation?
- Is there an increase or reduction in the person's motivation levels and abilities to join in usual activities such as personal care, work and leisure activities?
- The person's communication abilities
- Is the person acting in a way that is dangerous to themselves or others?

Any data that has been gathered regarding any of the above is extremely valuable and should be included in the consultation and assessment process.

Any change from usual patterns is significant.

Intervention and support options

There are many different types of interventions and support options available and there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Different types of treatment are used for different forms of mental illness and are tailored to the individual circumstances.

Some of the current treatments include:

Psychological approaches

Psychological approaches include having the opportunity to explore problems and find some practical solutions. Traditionally these forms of therapy were thought inappropriate for people with intellectual disability but recent work has shown very successful outcomes using;

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)
- Support groups

Education and Training

Social skills, anger management, relaxation, desensitisation, stress management, self regulation and/or assertiveness training.

Positive Behaviour Support

Positive Behaviour Support incorporating learning principles and environmental interventions.

Medication

Medication prescribed under close medical supervision, particularly to monitor possible side-effects. Medication has a role to play but is most beneficial when used in conjunction with other interventions that provide opportunities for the person to manage their mental health issue.

Other Helpful Resources

Disability Services—Centre for Disability Health

Call: 8397 8100

SA Health Mental Health Triage Service

Call: 13 14 65 (statewide) 24 hours, seven days a week. This service provides advice in emergencies and is the main point of access into mental health services.

SANE Australia

SANE conducts programs, educational campaigns and research to improve the lives of people living with mental illness, their family and friends. SANE also operates a helpline and website. Online helpline and information available at:

www.sane.org or freecall 1800 18 7263* (*mobile phone calls incur a charge)

National Association for the Dually Diagnosed (NADD)

NADD is the leading North American expert in providing professionals, educators, policy makers, and families with education, training, and information on mental health issues relating to persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities

www.thenadd.org

Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

<http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/>

University of Birmingham Learning Disabilities Medication Guideline

<http://www.ld-medication.bham.ac.uk>

Intellectual Disability Mental Health First Aid Manual

By Kitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM, Pappas, R, Frize, M. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre; 2010 [online] Accessed 28/06/2011

This is a supplement to the 2nd Edition Standard Mental Health First Aid Manual. It is a resource for people supporting adults with intellectual disability who are experiencing an emerging mental health problem or mental health crisis.

www.mhfa.com.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2nd_edition_id_manual_dec10.pdf

