

# Supporting Mental Health Concerns

## Key Facts

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illnesses than society as a whole. However, treatment is available for most mental illnesses.

It can be difficult to diagnose a mental disorder in people with I/DD, especially if they have limited verbal communication.

Families, support workers, and disability professionals need to be alert for signs of mental health concerns and then seek advice from appropriate health professionals.

## Types of Mental Illness

There are many mental illnesses. Some of the common types are:

**Anxiety disorders:** The person feels very anxious or panicky in particular situations or most of the time. One type of anxiety disorder is obsessive-compulsive disorder — the person has very anxious thoughts that are only relieved when they do particular activities, including handwashing.

**Mood disorders:** A person with depression may feel ongoing and overwhelming sadness that affects things like sleep, appetite, and energy levels.

**Bipolar disorder** can involve both “highs” and “lows.” During highs, the person may be excessively energetic, talk very fast and appear overly confident. During lows, the person may seem depressed.

## What to do if you see these signs

When a person’s behavior deteriorates, usually two things should be done:

1. The person’s doctor may check for a medical cause for the behavior. The person may be in pain but cannot explain it; or, the doctor may suspect the person is experiencing a mental illness.
2. A behavior support practitioner should look into the reasons for the behavior change, including: Is the person bored, or frustrated by something? The practitioner can then design behavior support strategies that address the cause of the behavior. In extreme situations — such as the person appears to be suicidal — you may need to get help from the local mental health crisis team or other emergency service.



## Signs that a person *might* have a Mental Illness

If a person’s normal behavior changes, this might signify a mental health concern. For example, the person:

- Does not want to do things they would normally do
- Seems to be losing skills
- Seems anxious or down or very elated
- Is hurting themselves or others
- Appears to be talking to themselves
- Has unusual changes in sleeping or eating patterns or in weight (gain or loss)
- Starts to have challenging behavior or it gets worse OR the person’s behavior seems to go in cycles – normal behavior, then unexplained harmful behaviors.

## Finding a Suitable Mental Health Professional

When looking for a mental health professional, it is important to remember that it may take some time to find someone who meets the needs of the person. Sometimes, primary care providers (PCPs) treat certain mental illnesses. Other times, they refer the person to a psychiatrist or other mental health provider.



Diagnosing the condition is often difficult with a person who has difficulty describing their thoughts and feelings. Also, mental illnesses sometimes have different symptoms for people with I/DD than they have for those without I/DD. Sometimes, a psychologist or other mental health professional will base treatment on a prediction about what is likely to be the person's mental illness and the person's response to the treatment helps clarify the diagnosis.

Pediatricians sometimes treat mental illnesses in children with I/DD. However, they may also want the advice of a mental health professional, particularly if the pediatrician lacks experience in this

## For More Information

Tips on finding the right mental health professional for you:

<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Living-with-a-Mental-Health-Condition/Finding-a-Mental-Health-Professional>

<https://marketplace.cms.gov/outreach-and-education/downloads/c2c-provider-right-for-you.pdf>

## You might be interested in these fact sheets:

- Different Types of Health Services
- Signs of Illness
- Encouraging Preventative Health Care

*This fact sheet was created in June 2021.*

*The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to review the information in this fact sheet within the context of educational purposes and when appropriate, share it with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.*

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