

## Why do we Find it So Hard to Talk About Mental Health?

Why we shouldn't feel ashamed of mental illness and what we can do to improve our mental health and wellbeing.

By [Dr Samantha Clarke](#) - February 26, 2017



Why Is It Hard To Talk About Mental Health

According to SANE Australia, nearly half (45 per cent) of the population will experience symptoms that meet the criteria for a mental disorder at some stage in their lives and almost one in five Australians (20 per cent) will meet this criteria in any 12-month period. This goes to show how common significant mental health symptoms are.

But despite the prevalence of mental health concerns in Australia, the topic of mental health is still very much taboo. People stigmatise mental health and don't talk about it as openly as cancer, diabetes or other health issues, despite the level of impact it can have on the individual and their loved ones.

Three out of four people with a mental illness report that they have experienced stigma<sup>1</sup>. These negative attitudes and perceptions of mental illness create prejudices, which lead to discrimination, and this can have serious repercussions. Stigma can serve as a major barrier to recovery as it stops

people from asking for help and getting the treatment and support they need. Further, it can add a level of shame to the person's experience further exacerbating their distress.

Chris, who was diagnosed as bipolar over a year ago, experienced stigma, "There is certainly a stigma, both externally and internally. The few times I have disclosed my diagnosis to friends, they have tried to not change the way that they react towards me, but I can tell that there are some serious unanswered questions going through their minds."

"Having this label only serves to add to this consistent unavoidable feeling, that I will be exposed and everything I have worked towards will be taken away from me," Chris explains. "It is not rational, but that is the nature of the beast."

Openly discussing mental health can help break down the social stigmas associated, leading to more people seeking treatment. As we can see from the statistics, these mental health concerns are common and over a life span they are even the norm (45 per cent), so why are we still reacting to these conditions as abnormal?

Casey lived with the symptoms of depression for 10 years but eventually found a way to break the cycle and now talks about her experience open and honestly. "It was 'in the family' so my mother had almost talked me into staying on antidepressants and just accepting it," says Casey. After spending a lot of time researching, she managed to find a therapy that worked for her and now lives free from the symptoms of depression.

The more hidden mental health remains, the more people will continue to believe that it is shameful and needs to be concealed. We need to start creating a culture where we are willing to open up and be vulnerable about our experiences and these include mental health concerns. This will help us to see the commonality in our human experience and help to shift the false beliefs and negative stereotypes.

Here are five evidence-based behaviours that you can incorporate to improve your mental health:

### **1. Be Kind to Yourself**

Remember that mental health concerns can affect anyone across their lifespan. Try not to get hooked up in shameful thoughts that only intensify the distress. Building a practice of mindfulness and acceptance can help you to be more aware and let go of unworkable thoughts.

### **2. Take Care of Your Body and Mind**

Taking care of the basics is a foundation of both physical and mental health. The link between mind and body is well researched. Eat nutritious meals, drink plenty of water and avoid cigarettes and alcohol. Take time to move your body and aim to get 8-9 hours of sleep.

### **3. Learn How to Deal with Stress**

Stress is a part of life. It's how we learn to cope with these day-to-day stresses that make all the difference to our wellbeing. Try meditation or mindfulness practices to help your mind re-set after a stressful experience has passed. Take up a daily movement practice such as yoga, walking or dancing. Moving your body helps to release tension in the muscles and also endorphins, which provide a pleasant feeling. To get the most benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise daily.

### **4. Surround Yourself with Good People**

Make time to spend with good friends and family. Surrounding yourself with those that love and care about you can do wonders for your mental health and give you a balance to see that you are more than just the symptoms you are experiencing.

## **5. Get Help When you Need it**

Mental health symptoms can be extremely distressing and life altering. Seeking help is a sign of strength and courage. Choose a therapist who is able to give you some evidence based skills in how to change the way you relate to these symptoms and who can empower you to continue to work towards the life you want.

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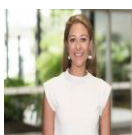
Samantha Clarke is a Clinical Psychologist and Personal Trainer who provides people with the skills to work through difficulties and places an emphasis on helping each individual move towards their personal goals. She also believes that wellbeing and vitality come from incorporating an integrated approach to health care. Samantha's work has a strong foundation in providing Mindfulness-based interventions and she is particularly interested in assisting people with addressing lifestyle difficulties and overall wellness. She completed her PhD in the area of goal setting and striving, and focuses on assisting people in clarifying their values to assist in building and maintaining motivation to achieve health goals.

Samantha is the Director of a psychology practice on the Sunshine Coast. She also provides personal training and runs Mind Body Resilience Retreats for wellness industry professionals and individuals in Australia and overseas.

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Dr Samantha Clarke (PhD) Clinical Psychologist, Dr Samantha Clarke, incorporates a holistic approach to healthcare, placing emphasis on helping each individual move towards a more fulfilling and meaningful life. Samantha has experience assisting people address lifestyle factors to enhance their overall sense of health, and her work has a strong foundation in providing mindfulness-based interventions. Samantha runs Mind Body Resilience Retreats for wellness industry professionals and individuals to help them reconnect with their sense of meaning, combat burnout and kick-start their overall health.