

HEALTH REPORT

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STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS MEANS PEOPLE RELUCTANT TO SEEK TREATMENT

People showing early signs of mental illness can be reluctant to seek medical treatment due to a perceived lack of public sympathy towards these conditions, according to new research released today. Alarming, four out of five (80 percent) Australians believe the general community is not understanding and supportive of people with mental illness.

The research, conducted for SANE Australia and published in this month's Pfizer Australia Health Report, also found that one in three (30 percent) of those surveyed said they were unsure how a friend or colleague would react to them on hearing that they had a mental illness. They are concerned that sharing this information with others could mean they may be sacked from their job, discriminated against and mocked, or lose important relationships.

One finding shows that three in four people do not know the early signs of mental illness. This lack of awareness, combined with stigma, further reduces the likelihood of a person seeking help early.

Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia, says: "It is sobering to learn that in 2007 people may not seek help for early symptoms of mental illness for fear of being ridiculed, isolated or losing their job. This demonstrates the great need for community education that mental illness is real and needs real treatment. This stigma is particularly tragic as we know that early intervention for mental illness is crucial to reduce the numbers of people who die by suicide."

Despite the lack of perceived public sympathy for people with mental illnesses, the research did detect some positive trends. More than four in five Australians (83 percent) recognise mental illness as a medical condition affecting the way someone acts and feels.

Anyone can help a friend who shows the early signs of mental illness by encouraging them to talk to their GP about their concerns, or offering to go to the doctor with them for support.

Seek a medical assessment as soon as possible if someone is experiencing possible symptoms of mental illness, such as:

- Feels unusually sad or worried for more than two weeks



- Thinks they are worthless
- Feels it would not matter if they died
- Sleeps poorly or stays awake all night
- Becomes afraid or suspicious for no reason
- Hears voices no one else can hear

For information about the full range of early signs of mental illness, call the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) or read the Factsheets on the SANE website at www.sane.org

SANE Australia has collaborated with Pfizer Australia to assist with educating the public about the early signs of mental illness to produce this month's edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report. Free copies can be requested by phoning 1800 675 229 or by visiting www.healthreport.com.au where people can also sign-up for email alerts of future editions.

Findings are based on responses from 1,499 Australians aged 18 years and over. The research was conducted in August 2006 by independent consultants Stollznow Research. Pfizer Australia is the nation's leading research-based health care company, investing over \$A42m in local research and development annually. For more information, visit www.pfizer.com.au

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Interviews AVAILABLE with barbara hocking, SANE AUSTRALIA Executive Director

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