There are many myths surrounding mental illness, many of which stigmatise those with depression, bipolar, schizophrenia and the myriad of other mental illnesses. Here are some quick clarifications.

Are people with mental illness inherently violent?
No. A person with a mental illness is no more dangerous than anyone else in the population. Violence is not a symptom of psychotic illnesses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. In fact, people with mental illness are much more likely to experience violence than to become violent themselves.

How many people in Australia are affected by mental illness?
1 in 5 Australians will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives. Mental disorders are the third leading cause of disability burden in Australia.

What types of mental illnesses are common?
10% of Australians are affected by anxiety disorders at some point in their life and about 20% are affected by depression. 6% of Australians will experience a major depressive illness and 3% will be affected by psychotic illnesses like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia at some stage in their life. Eating disorders are common in adolescents and young women. Anorexia nervosa is the third most common chronic condition in young Australian females.

Do people ever recover from mental illness?
Most people affected by mental illness will fully recover - especially if they get help early. Some people may be well for long periods of time and experience infrequent episodes, whereas others may only experience one episode of mental illness and then fully recover.

A small number of people will experience ongoing illness. While some people may experience significant disability as a result of the condition, many others live full and productive lives.

Are mental illnesses really diseases?
Yes. Just like diabetes, heart disease or cancer, mental illnesses are legitimate illnesses. They involve changes or imbalances in brain chemistry and complex physiological processes. As such, those affected require treatment and understanding.

Can people affected by mental illness work?
Yes. People with mental illness can function well in the workplace and are unlikely to miss any more days of work because of their condition than people with a chronic physical illness like heart disease or diabetes.

What is stigma?
Stigma against people with a mental illness generally involves hurtful and inaccurate representations of them as incompetent, comical or violent. These representations are dehumanising and make people the object of ridicule or fear. Stigma in the media can refer to hostile language, misuse of medical terminology or inaccurate stereotypes. This kind of stigma in the media is particularly damaging because the media can shape and reinforce community attitudes towards people who experience mental illness.

Will medication alone treat mental illnesses?
Not fully. Recommended treatment plans generally involve both medical and psychological intervention. Medical intervention can include the prescription of medications. Psychological intervention can include a range of treatments and therapies, for example: cognitive behaviour therapy, interpersonal therapy, psychotherapy or community support programs.

Do people with schizophrenia have ‘split personalities’?
No. While the term “schiz” does come from ancient Greek meaning “split” and “phren” meaning “mind”, Eugen Bleuler (a psychiatrist who coined the term schizophrenia in the 1920s) was referring to the disruption in the person’s thoughts, emotional responses and behaviour.

References
SANE Australia 2012, What is stigma? www.sane.org/stigmawatch/what-is-stigma