Mental illness or mental health problem?
Just as the term ‘immune disease’ refers to a group of illnesses affecting the immune system, a mental illness is a health problem that affects how a person behaves, feels, thinks and interacts with other people. Standardised criteria are used to diagnose a mental illness. Mental health ‘problems’ can affect people in similar ways, but to a lesser extent than a ‘mental illness’.
Approximately 1 in 5 Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, and the majority of people will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives. Mental health problems are more common than mental illnesses and include the mental ill health that can be temporarily experienced as a reaction to various life stressors such as the loss of a loved one. Everyone experiences fear, tension or sadness at times; however, when these feelings become so overwhelming that people have difficulty coping with day-to-day activities, a mental health problem or illness may be diagnosed.

Types of mental illness
Mental illnesses are categorised into different types with varying degrees of severity. A few of the major types of mental illnesses are schizophrenia, anxiety, personality disorders, depression, eating disorders and bipolar mood disorder. Anxiety and depressive disorders are the most common mental illnesses, with varying symptoms ranging from problems with behaviours and thinking, to having suicidal thoughts.

Treatment
The majority of mental illnesses can be treated effectively. The earlier treatment starts, the more positive the outcome can be, so recognising the early signs and symptoms of mental illness and accessing effective treatment early is very important. Effective treatments for mental illnesses can include:

- cognitive and behavioural psychological therapies
- medication
- psychiatric rehabilitation
- psycho-social support
- learning self-management skills
- avoidance of risk factors such as alcohol and drugs.

People with a mental illness need the same support and understanding that people with a physical illness are given. A mental illness is not an illness for which anyone should be blamed and it is rarely possible for someone with a mental illness to alleviate symptoms just by willing them away.

Quick facts
Around 20% of adults are affected by some form of mental disorder every year.
Around 3% of adults are psychiatrically disabled by the effects of mental illness.
Up to 15% of those seriously affected by mental illness eventually die by suicide.

Depression is one of the most common conditions in young people and increases during adolescence.
By the time they are 25 years old, at least one third of young people have had an episode of mental illness.
Mental illnesses are not purely ‘psychological’ and can have many physical features.

No one is immune to mental health problems - anyone can develop a mental illness.

Where to get help
Your GP, community mental health centre or community health centre are good places to start. For immediate counselling services, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.
For further information on mental illnesses go to:
www.sane.com.au
www.mifa.org.au
www.ranzcp.org

References
Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, What is mental illness?

Sane Australia, Facts and Figures,
www.sane.org/information/factsheets-podcasts/204-facts-and-figures