

Mental Health Conditions: Signs and Symptoms

Recognise patterns. Notice change. Ask rather than diagnose.

SIGNS ARE CLUES - NOT CONCLUSIONS

Look at CHANGE (what is different from usual) • DURATION (how long/how often) • IMPACT (what is happening in daily life) • CONCERN (including safety). One sign or symptom does not confirm a condition.

D Depression

- persistent low mood, emptiness or irritability
- loss of interest or pleasure
- sleep, appetite, energy, concentration or hope changes

CLINICAL CLUE Symptoms persist and meaningfully affect everyday functioning.

A Anxiety disorders

- excessive worry, fear or panic
- racing heart, tension, breathlessness or nausea
- avoidance, reassurance-seeking or difficulty functioning

CLINICAL CLUE Fear or worry is difficult to control and interferes with life.

T Trauma and PTSD

- intrusive memories, nightmares or flashbacks
- avoidance, numbness or disconnection
- hypervigilance, irritability, sleep or concentration changes

CLINICAL CLUE Symptoms follow trauma and persist beyond an immediate stress response.

B Bipolar disorder

- distinct periods of elevated or irritable mood
- reduced need for sleep, increased energy or speech
- racing thoughts, impulsivity, risk-taking or depression

CLINICAL CLUE Episodes represent a clear change from usual functioning.

P Psychosis / schizophrenia

- hallucinations such as hearing voices
- delusions or strongly held unusual beliefs
- disorganised thinking, behaviour or decline in self-care

CLINICAL CLUE New or severe psychosis needs prompt clinical assessment.

O Obsessive-compulsive disorder

- intrusive, unwanted thoughts, images or urges
- repetitive actions or mental rituals
- significant distress, avoidance or time disruption

CLINICAL CLUE Compulsions are performed to reduce distress, not simply from preference.

E Eating disorders

- restriction, binge eating, purging or compulsive exercise
- preoccupation with food, weight, shape or control
- dizziness, fainting or other physical changes

CLINICAL CLUE Medical risk may be serious at any body size.

S Substance-use disorders

- difficulty controlling alcohol or drug use
- craving, tolerance or withdrawal
- continued use despite health, relationship or role harm

CLINICAL CLUE Withdrawal from some substances can be medically dangerous.

AD ADHD

- persistent inattention or organisation difficulty
- impulsivity, restlessness or activity-regulation difficulty
- patterns across settings affecting study, work or relationships

CLINICAL CLUE Assessment considers development, onset and impairment.

PN Perinatal mental health

- persistent anxiety, low mood, guilt or hopelessness
- sleep problems beyond expected infant disruption
- distressing thoughts or difficulty feeling connected

CLINICAL CLUE Confusion, hallucinations or severe agitation after birth are an emergency.

G Grief and adjustment

- sadness, worry, anger, numbness or sleep changes
- distress after loss, migration, separation or major change
- difficulty adapting or returning to daily roles

CLINICAL CLUE Grief is not automatically mental illness; impact and safety matter.

SI Suicidal distress / self-harm

- hopelessness, feeling a burden or wanting to die
- withdrawal, giving things away or sudden concerning change
- self-harm, plans, access to means or recent attempt

CLINICAL CLUE Ask directly about suicide. Immediate danger or inability to stay safe requires 000.

WHAT MAKES A SIGN CLINICALLY IMPORTANT?

A professional considers pattern over time, severity, distress, impairment, safety, physical health, medicines, alcohol or other drugs, developmental stage and cultural context. Observation describes what you noticed; assumption decides the meaning without asking; diagnosis requires an appropriately qualified professional.