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Understanding Mental Health and Mental Illness

How's your mental health?

The way you answer that question can vary. One day, you might describe it as “great.” But depending on what you’re experiencing, you might feel like you are struggling another time. You also may not feel comfortable being completely transparent about your mental health at times, especially when you feel like it’s low.

The way we describe our mental health adjusts regularly. It’s less of a scale where the measures are perfectly balanced or tipped in one direction. We can be kinder to ourselves if we consider mental health more as a track with different stops along the way, where you can move fluidly in either direction. Since it’s not static, your mental health will go back and forth along the track throughout your lifetime.

This article examines how mental health affects “how we think, feel and act as we cope with life.”¹ It will also explain the differences between mental health and mental illness since the two terms are not the same, but are related. Finally, we’ll explore available supporting resources and consider ways to develop and strengthen your mental well-being.

What is mental health?

When we talk about mental health, we focus on how we feel emotionally and psychologically. Still, we sometimes fail to realize the connections our mental health has to physical health. And while mental health is undoubtedly a thing, we also need to

consider it more broadly as a state of being because it’s our awareness of our mental state. We can describe our mental health as good, poor, or even something in-between.

Good mental health means supporting “our preferred way of living” and expressing it in how we think, feel, experience life, behave, and react.² However, you can project a “combination of feeling good and functioning effectively” even if you don’t “feel good about yourself and happy all the time.”³

If you consider your mental health good, you can process, manage, and cope with a wide range of “natural emotions.”⁴ That includes more negative ones – such as sadness, anger, grief, and failure. When we begin to find it challenging to live with negative emotions, it can “affect our mental well-being.”⁵ We cannot function well, and our evaluation of our mental health may move from good to poor. Mental health struggles often reveal themselves in our physical, emotional, and social health.⁶ We may feel more comfortable withdrawing from situations, people, and activities we may have enjoyed in the past.

Perhaps the most crucial consideration is that mental health is very different for everyone, and we shouldn’t attempt to draw comparisons between people’s experiences or mental health. It takes conscious effort to sort out our feelings. Still, the dedication supports the idea that we can return to a state of good mental health with this sort of built-in resilience.



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What is mental illness?

Sometimes, we can start to have a hard time coping with life's stressors over a prolonged time and in a way that "affect[s] thinking, emotions, and behaviors."⁷ Mental illness is sometimes the result of the brain changes experienced during these times. It can leave us "unable to think, feel, or act" how we want to.⁸

Mental illnesses can be:

- episodic
- diagnosed
- a result of environmental stress
- genetic
- trauma-incited
- or a combination of these

One of the biggest challenges in addressing mental illness is that it is still highly stigmatized. Often that means we don't talk about it because we don't want to face judgment from others. It doesn't make much sense. Think about how we react or respond to other illnesses that may have more physical manifestations with more empathy, compassion, and openness. Those situations can be equally full of uncertainty. The irony is that stigma most frequently develops from a lack of understanding and fear created by misrepresentations of mental illness that we've seen or heard. Stigma unfairly targets the person experiencing mental illness rather than drawing concern or focus to the condition.

Experiencing a mental illness can be frightening, but it shouldn't deter someone from reaching out to get or offer help. People need care and treatment to help them recover from mental illness. They can only do so when they are supported and not fearful of judgement from friends, family members or strangers. Treatment can help someone who has difficulty coping with all the unexpected things that life presents. The goal is to help them return to feeling more confident and aware of the state of their mental health.



What are some signs of positive mental health and mental health struggles?

Some characteristics of "mentally healthy individuals" include having⁹:

- A sense of joy, satisfaction, and mental peace
- A sense of high self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence
- A passion for life and drive to accomplish personal goals
- A sense of purpose in their relationships and work
- A sense of optimism and positivity
- An ability to take and fulfill responsibilities
- An ability to be compassionate and empathic towards self and others
- An ability to have fun, laugh and make others feel happy
- An ability to cope with stress and overcome adversities
- An ability to balance work, relationships, rest, interests, fun
- An ability to learn new skills and improve their lives

Some signs of mental health struggle include¹⁰:

- Confused thinking and strange thoughts (delusions)
- Prolonged depression, sadness, or irritability
- Extreme highs and lows, constant worry
- Social withdrawal
- Dramatic changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Anger (strong)
- Suicidal thoughts
- Physical ailments
- Substance use
- Intense fears
- Changes in performance at school or work
- Defiance of authority, disobedience, or aggression

Suppose someone you know is showing several signs of struggle. In that case, you may want to consult with your family doctor or mental health professional. Remember that poor mental health can affect anyone at any age. Don't wait to extend help or underestimate when there is a severe or immediate need.¹¹

Why should mental illness be addressed?

When people lack social support and confidence and start to feel powerless or helpless, they are at a greater risk of developing mental illness. It's important to understand that:

“Different mental illnesses can range in terms of severity, and multiple mental illnesses can occur at the same time. Mental illness can also be temporary or long lasting. Mental illnesses are also much more common than people may realize, with over 264 million people worldwide suffering from depression alone.”¹²

Mental illness affects people's cognition, emotions, body, and behaviours. One of the biggest causes of mental health challenges results from the effects of harmful stress, though we all handle stress differently. When it's both prolonged and overwhelming, stress can contribute to “anxiety, depression, sleep problems, pain and bodily complaints such as muscle tension...headaches, gastrointestinal problems, a weakened immune system, hypertension (high blood pressure), cardiovascular problems and stroke.”¹³

Addressing mental illness and mental health has reached a critical point worldwide. As the World Health Organization has stated, we need to “strengthen our response” to offer “affordable, effective and feasible strategies...to promote, protect and restore mental health.”¹⁴ Mental illness is the “leading cause of disability... [affecting] around 450 million people...worldwide.”¹⁵

Understanding the risk factors is only part of what's required for us to act collectively to increase awareness and reduce stigma. We can also embrace and influence policy change and attitudes, plus advocate for access and consistency of treatment approaches. Problems associated with mental health are a global issue. Still, not all countries or governments have fully recognized the extent or depth of the crisis. and how inaction “ruins health, threatens lives and hurts economies.”¹⁶

What kinds of supports are available to care for our mental health?

- **In Canada**, the Government of Canada has compiled an extensive group of resources and supports under the title of “Mental Health Support: Get help” for people to explore. It focuses on nationally available help offered 24/7 from an organization such as Wellness Together Canada [wellnesstogether.ca], plus information for targeted groups. The Mental Health Support hub also lists supports available within each province.

Visit <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/mental-health-services/mental-health-get-help.html>

- **In the United States**, the Government has taken a similar approach, offering a compilation of resources and information about “How To Get Mental Health Help.” There is information about treatment services in the U.S. and its territories, plus details about coverage that may be available through health insurance plans, clinical trials, and resources for veterans and their families.

Visit <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/get-help>

- **In Mexico**, according to research published in the International Journal of Mental Health Systems in 2021, the approach to mental health services is evolving.¹⁷ There is still a focus on education and community-based programs and facilities that offer help and treatment options. The effort is being coordinated by a non-profit organization, Red Voz Pro Salud Mental (VPSM). It includes establishing support groups, leveraging social media for education and working to “promote laws to the federal government.”¹⁸ Still according to one study shared by the non-profit organization, The Borgen Project, “Mexico ranked second in the world in the level of stigma associated with mental health services.”¹⁹

Visit <https://www.vozprosaludmental.org.mx>

What are some ways that you can practice mental well-being?

Here are a few ways that you can take care of your mental health:

- Stay physically healthy by getting enough exercise and sleep, but also focusing on keeping up with good nutrition.
- Build your social health by connecting to friends, family, and the community. Volunteering or taking up a hobby are excellent ways to strengthen your social circles.
- Try working on developing good mental health practices daily through meditation, writing in a gratitude journal, and using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or guided imagery.²⁰



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