

Minding our Mental Health

This online resource focuses on mental health as a vital and integral part of overall health and presents information about helping and hindering factors.

Key messages

- Mental health and wellbeing is important for all and an essential ingredient of overall health
- Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness
- Our physical and mental is interlinked and each influences the other
- Mental health difficulties are relatively common and have a personal and social impact
- Our level of mental health changes and is influenced by a complex mix of personal and environmental factors
- Life events and life stages, stress and discrimination influence our mental health
- Health promotion at personal, community and societal levels is necessary to optimise mental health for everyone
- Natural social supports are important for everyone. Health professional supports may be required also for people who are experiencing mental health difficulties
- Mental health recovery is possible

What is mental health?

Mental health is a vital and integral part of overall health and is essential to healthy human functioning.

The World Health Organisation (1946) defines health as "*... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*" and mental health as

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“...a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”(2001).

These definitions treat health as an integrated whole, as distinct from the traditional Cartesian split between physical and mental health and highlight also the different aspects of mental health.

People who are at the high end of well-being across these components have been described as ‘flourishing’ or ‘thriving’, while those at the low end are described as ‘languishing’ and people may move along this spectrum across the lifespan.

Having a low level of wellbeing however is not the same as having a mental illness and it is possible to experience flourishing or moderate levels of mental wellbeing, despite experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health.

Being mentally healthy does not mean that you feel happy all the time but rather that despite the ups and downs of life, you are able to maintain a positive self-concept and a positive outlook towards others and the world.

Mental and physical health is intimately related. Good mental health acts promotes good physical health and vice versa. Poor mental health on the other hand can have a negative impact upon physical health and can lead to, for instance, an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Poor physical health similarly increases the risk of developing mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

Incidence and impact of mental health difficulties

Mental ill-health is an issue for everyone as one in four people each year and one in six at any point in time experience diagnosable mental health difficulties.

In addition to the emotional distress and reduced functioning that may be experienced by a person with a mental health difficulty, there may be a related societal impact. For example, mental health problems in adolescence can negatively affect educational and vocational attainment, which can have lasting consequences into adulthood and also result in reduced economic productivity (Kessler et al. 1995).

In the EU, mental health difficulties today account for 20% of the health problems affecting workers, with productivity related costs running into many billions of Euros.

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Mental health as a contextual process

As we have seen, mental health does not occur in a vacuum but in the context of a person's overall life situation.

We can think about the factors that influence mental health in terms of **personal (internal)** and **environmental (external)** factors that dynamically interact over the course of a person's life to create a more helping or hindering context for our mental health. (The word context comes from the Latin to 'weave together'). Each of us has a particular optimum mix of these factors that acts as a personal recipe for wellbeing. For instance, some people relax by going to a party while others prefer to read a book.

We can distinguish between **helping & hindering personal factors** and **helping & hindering environmental factors**.

Examples of helping personal factors are having a positive self-concept, realistic attitudes and a positive hopeful disposition. Hindering factors on the other hand involve the opposite of these characteristics. For instance, some people who experience mental health difficulties find that the line between their mental health difficulties and their sense of who they are becomes blurred. Instead of seeing themselves as a person in their own right who experiences difficulties, the difficulties can take centre stage and dominate person's sense of identity. The challenge then becomes to reframe the experience and incorporate it into a wider positive identity.

Examples of helping environmental factors are decent housing, supportive relationships and services and meaningful activity while being the object of discrimination as a result of stigma is a key example of a hindering environmental factor.

The role of stress and other risk factors in creating mental health difficulties

Stress is a critical factor in the development of mental health difficulties. While a certain amount of stress in our lives is positive e.g. in preparing for a test, the presence of extended stress e.g. racism and extreme stress e.g. trauma and racism can overcome a person's coping resources and tip the balance into ill-health, both mental and physical to varying degrees.

Mental health difficulties may range from mild to severe in terms of personal distress and their effect on day-to-day functioning and may vary in duration. While we do not know exactly why some people develop more significant mental health difficulties, it is more likely

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that the complex interplay of multiple risk factors creates a greater vulnerability to developing mental health difficulties

While the availability of **natural supports** e.g. family and friends may be sufficient to help resolve mild mental health difficulties, the experience of more significant difficulties may point also to the involvement of health **professional supports**.

The role of stigma and discrimination in inhibiting mental health

A fundamental barrier to understanding mental health problems and promoting mental health is the presence of stigma and discrimination. 90% of people who experience mental health difficulties have been the victim of discriminatory behaviour in the realms of education, employment, healthcare and family. People often find that this type of behaviour can be more difficult than their experience of mental health difficulties and can prevent them from seeking help. Despite the evidence for mental health recovery and the availability of effective treatments, a common misconception exists that people who experience mental health difficulties will always have a life-long condition, are unreliable and difficult. These stereotypes have often led to people being treated as second class citizens, perversely resulting in exclusion from the social and other opportunities that are necessary for good mental health.

Promoting mental health

Given the range of factors that influence our mental health, we are becoming increasingly aware that we can take positive steps to protect and develop our own mental health. The **health promotion model** proposes an ecological approach to addressing the known determinants of wellbeing in order to increase the likelihood of mental health.

Firstly, we need to **strengthen individuals**. Wellness Recovery Action Planning® (WRAP) is one example of a well-established wellbeing self-management system which emphasises the importance of developing a personal toolbox of strategies to enhance wellbeing and protect against mental distress. This can include things like contacting friends, using relaxation and stress reduction techniques, taking a walk, getting enough sleep and seeing a therapist.

The model also recommends the cultivation of **social networks** e.g. social support and highlights the role of **communities** e.g. promoting civic engagement at neighbourhood level

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and the need to effect structural changes in **society** in order to create opportunities and inclusion in, for example, education, employment and housing.

Mental health recovery

Traditionally, people thought of mental health difficulties as catastrophic and shameful. We now know from both personal accounts and scientific evidence that people can and do recover and want the same things in life as everyone else.

It has been established repeatedly that a majority of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, for instance, become 'symptom free' over time, a finding which has challenged the traditional pessimistic prognosis attached to this type of condition.

Mental health recovery is defined in many ways but can be considered as the restoration and development of **psychological and social wellbeing**.

While traditionally the term recovery has been used to denote 'cure' and people 'being symptom-free' (**clinical recovery**), an alternative understanding has emerged in recent years from people with lived experience of mental health recovery.

Recovery in this sense (**personal recovery**) is a universal human experience involving the creation of a fulfilling, meaningful and contributing life, sometimes in the face of on-going challenges (symptoms) and that this process occurs through the use of the personal and environmental resources, discussed earlier.

Conclusion

Mental health is a vital and integral part of overall health and is essential to healthy human functioning.

Personal and environmental factors positively and negatively affect mental health and these have important individual and societal consequences.

These consequences present a strong rationale for a significant investment in strategies and resources that will both protect and promote mental health and reduce risk factors at individual and wider social levels.

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Postscript

This resource has focussed upon the universal dimensions of mental health. In the next companion resource, we will focus on the role of **professional services** in supporting people's mental health and wellbeing.

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