

Mental health and mental ill-health



Fact Sheet

Health

Health is more than just the absence of an illness; it embraces a holistic sense of physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Most of us find we have strengths or vulnerability in a range of areas and taken as a whole these make up our general state of health.

Mental health

Mental health is a positive capacity and embraces aspects of our lives such as our feelings, thoughts, behaviour and relationships with others. Like our physical health, most of us have areas of strength and vulnerability and our mental health can change over time. Promoting strengths in our mental health helps us enjoy life, deal with stress and challenges, develop a sense of connection to others and make the most of opportunities.

Mental health can also be referred to as social and emotional wellbeing. Social and emotional wellbeing is often used to refer to mental health in early childhood development and education. In this sense it is a broad term that includes feelings, behaviour, goals and personal strengths.

Social and emotional wellbeing can be thought of differently depending on culture, temperament and individual differences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders generally prefer to use the term social and emotional wellbeing, as it reflects a more holistic concept of mental health. People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may also prefer this term to describe their views of mental health and mental illness.

Mental ill-health

Mental ill-health encompasses the spectrum of problems that impact and interfere negatively with an individual's cognitive, social and emotional capabilities. The term covers both mental health problems and mental illnesses.

Mental health problems

Everyone experiences mental health problems at some stage, and it is not the same as a mental illness. Mental health problems indicate a disruption to our usual level of social and emotional wellbeing, including when our abilities are negatively impacted. Often these can be natural responses to events and stressors in our lives and are usually less severe and of shorter duration than a mental illness.

Frequently, such problems resolve over time or when the situation changes. People who have developed resilience, which is the ability to bounce back during or following difficult times, may be able to resolve these situations more quickly and positively. Personal or professional support from family, friends, a counsellor or other professional can also lead to a better resolution.

If mental health problems persist or increase in severity, they may develop into a mental illness.

Mental illness or disorder

Mental illness is a collective term for a range of clinically diagnosable medical conditions, which change a person's thoughts, feelings, behaviour or relationships. The effects are usually more pronounced and long-lasting than a mental health problem and may not resolve without professional support or medical assistance.

A mental illness can be diagnosed by a doctor or mental health professional; this requires a certain combination of symptoms, of a particular severity, to be present over time. People with mental illness may benefit from counselling and practical support and/or may receive medical treatment such as medication.

Mental illnesses can be triggered by a combination of personality factors, negative life events, biological predisposition (such as family history), physical ill-health and other factors. Examples include anxiety, depression, psychosis, eating disorders and bipolar disorder.





Understanding the relationship between mental health and mental ill-health

Our health is not static but will change over time and can be thought of as along a continuum, ranging from optimal wellness through to serious illness. This can apply to both our physical health and mental health and wellbeing.

The Dual Continua Model of Mental Health (shown below) helps to explain how mental health and mental ill-health can influence each other, and are not opposing. For example, a person can be experiencing a mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, but have optimal mental health and wellbeing.

Dual Continua Model of Mental Health

(adapted from Tudor (1996); and Miles et al. (2010))

Optimal Mental Health and Wellbeing

A: Person without an illness or disorder who has positive wellbeing

B: Person with an illness or disorder who has positive wellbeing

No Mental Illness or Mental Health Problem

Mental Illness or Mental Health Problem

C: Person without an illness or disorder who has mental health problems

D: Person with an illness or disorder who has mental health problems

Minimal Mental Health and Wellbeing



What can teachers do to support the mental health of children and young people?

Teachers can play an important role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children in their care. Promoting social and emotional wellbeing from an early age and throughout childhood is thought to be associated with more positive behaviour, better academic achievement and improved health and wellbeing, even into adulthood.

Strategies for teachers include:

- Promoting caring and respectful relationships among all children and staff;
- Modelling the language and behaviour that you want children to develop;
- Negotiating high but achievable goals and support students to reach them;
- Helping children and young people to identify and pursue their own interests and goals where possible;
- Having clear expectations for behaviour and use positive behaviour management strategies;
- Using a variety of instructional techniques to cater for different learning styles;
- Providing opportunities for collaborative play and learning to develop social skills;
- Promoting a developmentally appropriate understanding of emotions, e.g. through interactions, stories *etc*;
- Involving children and young people in decision making, problem solving and setting group rules; and
- Acknowledging achievements and success, while offering support and constructive feedback in other areas.

Sources and Links

Hunter Institute of Mental Health:

www.himh.org.au/home/our-resources/what-is-mental-health

ReachOut.com Professionals:

au.professionals.reachout.com

Miles, J., Espiritu, R. C., Horen, N. M., Sebian, J. & Waetzig, E. (2010). A public health approach to children's mental health: A conceptual framework. Expanded Executive Summary. Washington: Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

Response Ability at Hunter Institute of Mental Health. (2010). *Social and emotional wellbeing: A teacher's guide*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Health and Ageing. Retrieved July 3, 2014 from: www.responseability.org/education-students

Stafford, K., Moore, C., Foggett, K., Kemp, E., & Hazell, T. (2007). Proving and improving: Exploring the links between resilience, behaviour and academic outcomes. In *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference*.

Tudor, K. (1996). *Mental health promotion: Paradigms and practice*. London: Routledge.