

Mental Health

There are many different definitions of *mental health*. Yet, they all try to capture one thing - the brain is what gives us mental health and the brain and body are linked. What is good for your body is good for your mind as well.

Mental health is impacted by our ability to adapt in healthy ways when we are faced with challenges (both negative and positive). In order to adapt to challenges, our brain must use all aspects of its functional ability: emotional, cognitive/thinking, behavioural, and signalling. The more challenges we take on the more successful we become in dealing with them.

Experiencing negative or difficult emotions is a part of mental health. Crying, feeling sad, getting annoyed or angry are all normal responses to life challenges. So are negative thoughts such as: “this is too hard for me”, or negative behaviours such as yelling at someone.

Feeling stressed does not mean that we have poor mental health. Being able to identify stress and then learning how to successfully overcome it in a way that solves the problem is important for having good mental health. For example, feeling stressed about writing an exam could lead to a negative behaviour like going out to a party with friends to escape the pressure. Or, it could lead to a neutral behaviour such as going for a run to release the stress. Yet, the most important strategy for adapting to exam stress will be to study and to find help with studying the concept or idea you are struggling with.

Just like a person can have good physical health and at the same time have a physical illness, people can have good mental health and a mental illness at the same time. Everyone has mental health.

No Distress

No distress - is a neutral state when a person is feeling at ease, settled, or balanced.

A person can be diagnosed with a mental disorder (illness) - another state of mental health and experience no distress.

For example, a student can be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and experience no distress by learning how to manage it through healthy coping strategies and treatment (psychotherapy).

While experiencing negative or difficult emotions a person can be in a state of no distress.

For example, a person can be experiencing deep grief be laughing with friends over a fond memory of the person who passed away.

Emotion words that describe a state of no distress may include:

- pensive, thoughtful, cognizant, aware, cautious, attentive, considerate, reflective

Can you think of other words to describe a state of no distress?

Activities that involve physical activity, play, creativity, imagination, social interactions can lead us to states of no distress.

It is not reasonable to expect that you can be in a constant state of no distress. Learning and healthy growth and development require that we experience mental distress so that we learn to adapt to changes and challenges.

Mental Distress

Mental distress is the inner signal of anxiety or stress that a person has when something in their environment is demanding that they adapt to a challenge such as:

- writing a test
- giving a presentation in front of the class
- asking a person out on date
- not making it onto a sports team

Young people dealing with everyday mental distress do not require counselling. Mental distress does not make someone sick. Through trial and error we learn can learn to manage mental distress. It is important that you do not avoid mental distress as it contributes to good mental health.

Mental distress is also known as a stress signal or a stress response. A stress signal can impact:

- **emotions/feelings:** worry, unhappiness, feeling energized, annoyance
- **cognition/thinking:** negative thoughts such as “I am not good at anything” and “I wish I did not have to do this” *OR* positive thoughts such as “ This is something I need to solve.”
- **your body (physical)** - stomach aches, headaches, experiencing “butterflies”
- **behaviours:** avoiding situations, engaging with challenges, helping someone, yelling at someone

Our responses to distress can be either negative or positive. It is important that we don't always focus on the negative responses.

Successfully dealing with stress by solving or overcoming a challenge teaches us strategies that can provide us with healthy ways to deal with future challenges. Dealing with stress contributes to our resiliency by helping us to learn and maintain important problem solving skills.

Everybody experiences mental distress everyday. We call it “stress”. It is a part of good mental health. It is a signal that tells us to try something new to solve the challenge we are facing.

Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems arise when a person is faced with a much larger stressor than usual such as:

- painful grief experienced from the loss of a loved one
- feeling disconnected or homesick after moving to a new country
- living with a serious physical illness and experiencing feelings of hopeless and helplessness

Sometimes (not always), a young person experiencing a mental health problem will exhibit noticeable difficulties in everyday functioning - at school and outside of school.

Support from a trusted adult is a key component that can help young people deal with mental health problems.

Everyone experiences strong emotions (such as sadness, grief, anger, heartbreak, etc.). However, *mental health problems* are experienced by difficult emotions and difficulties in function that may include”

- negative thinking (eg., “I don’t know if I can go on in my life”)
- physical problems (e.g., sleep problems, loss of energy)
- behavioural concerns (e.g., social withdrawal, avoidance of usual activities, angry outbursts)

Young people experiencing a mental health problem will often need additional support to help them through a difficult situation or assist them with problems in functioning (such as extra time with academic activities, time away from school to be with their families). Distress management skills and health enhancing activities will provide some support. In many cases, additional support is needed and comes from a counsellor, religious leader, or another person that has the skills needed to help effectively. Medical treatment (medication or psychotherapy) is usually not necessary.

Mental Illness

Mental illness is very different from mental distress and from a mental health problem. Mental illness arises from a complex interplay between a person's genes and the environment in which they live or have been exposed to at different times in their lives.

Mental illnesses are the result of changes in brain function as a result of a complex interaction between a person's genes and environment. When a person is impacted by a mental disorder, their brain is not working as it should be.

A person living with an untreated mental illness will experience:

- very strong, intense and ongoing challenges with emotions (e.g., Depression, panic attacks, overwhelming anxiety)
- disruptions to thinking (confusing thoughts, foggy thinking, suicidal thoughts)
- physical problems (extremely tired, weary, moving to much)
- behavioural problems (school refusal, poor self-care, withdrawal from friends)

The term "mental illness" is used to describe the wide range of mental disorders. *Mental illness* or mental disorders are medical conditions diagnosed by trained health professionals (such as doctors, mental health clinicians, psychiatric nurses and psychologists). These health professionals use international criteria to diagnosis mental illness.

A person living with mental illness is best helped by a trained health professional who can provide the best evidence-based treatments. An impacted person requires a specialized care or treatment.

Diagnosis of a mental disorder signifies that an individual needs the best evidence-based treatment (such as medications, psychotherapy, social interventions). Evidence-based treatment is provided by trained health care professionals. Mental disorders always require treatment.