

EXPLORING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH (Canadian Population Health Initiative 2009, www.cihi.ca)

Mental health promotion is about fostering the development of positive mental health by supporting individual resilience, while showing respect for culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity, creating supportive environments and addressing the influence of the broader determinants of mental health.

Mental health promotion is based on a recognition of and trust in people's basic resourcefulness and capacity for mental health and wellbeing.

Another way of operationalizing positive mental health is the way that we cope with and grow from the challenges we face in our daily lives and respond to major life events.

Coping can be defined as the conscious effort individuals make in times of stress to help regulate their emotions, thoughts, behaviours and physical health as well as their environments. These efforts may be directed towards engaging with and actively dealing with the emotions related to the stressful event or by disengaging from it and avoiding dealing with it.

Resilience refers to the ways in which some people facing adversity seem to deal with certain challenges with little or no apparent change in their daily functioning. It is the capability of individuals and systems (families, groups, communities) to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity and risk.

Coping and resilience are not about avoiding change or adversity but rather supporting people to grow from and engage with life events.

Spiritual wellbeing deserves attention as well. It is often described as a feeling of being connected to something larger than oneself and having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. It is seen as something holistic, beyond religious practices and beliefs, which includes broader values and principals which give meaning to life.

Anything that challenges the ability of individuals, groups and environments to interact in an effective and equitable manner can be seen as barriers to positive mental health.

Research presented by WHO has shown that there are numerous multi-directional links between positive mental health, mental illness, physical illness and positive physical health. Analysis showed that people reporting higher levels of positive mental health are less likely to report adverse health outcomes and more likely to report positive physical health outcomes.

Rates of reported mental illness decrease as levels of life enjoyment, coping ability and emotional well-being increase.

The majority of mental health strategies tend to focus on individuals, illnesses or specific "at risk" or "vulnerable" groups within the population. Strategies that focus on preventing/treating mental disorders tend to be individualistic in nature. They focus on reducing the incidence, prevalence and severity of a given mental illness. They also focus on mortality, morbidity. On the other hand strategies that focus on **mental health promotion** apply to all people and communities including at risk individuals, groups or those living with mental illness. Mental health promotion emphasizes supporting individual resilience, creating supportive environments and addressing the influence of the broader determinants of mental health. The specific goals of mental health promotion include enhancing protective factors that help individuals, groups and communities to deal with events and increasing conditions such as social cohesion, that reduce risk factors for diminished mental health among individuals, families and communities. At the community level efforts can focus on strengthening community action to promote positive mental health. There can be communities of place as well as communities of culture, ethnicity or faith. At the societal level efforts can focus on building healthy public policy and creating supportive environments for positive mental health.

People with a strong sense of community and belonging are more likely to report very good or excellent self perceived mental health.

Other population based strategies to promote optimal mental health include increasing public awareness, providing self help information, supporting community capacity building, engaging in advocacy activities, facilitating access to services, offering skills training and supporting personal growth.

Positive mental health goes beyond life enjoyment. It involves many aspects that are just as integral to our positive mental health, including the way that we deal with life's challenges, the way we experience and use our emotions to function and interact with others, the connectedness, meaning, purpose, values and beliefs by which we live, the connections that we have within the environments in which we live, work, learn and play, and our sense of equity and respect for people's differences.

Of the measures of positive mental health good coping ability is the most linked to excellent mental health. High positive mental health is reported by people who report having a high sense of community belonging and available social support.

One way of grouping mental health strategies and activities are into the broad levels of societal, community and individual.